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**Depression and ‘crises of meaninglessness’ in the political-economic theology of the money-God**

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**PhD Thesis**

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**August 2015**

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### **Declaration**

The submitted thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Lauane Baroncelli Nunes Freitas

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I dedicate this work to those struggling with depression and with the quest for a  
meaningful life.

## FOG

No king, no law; no peace and no war  
Defines the essence and existence  
This dim sparkling of the land  
Which is Portugal saddening  
The glow without light and without burning,  
As what the corpse will-o'-the-wisp holds.

No one knows what they want.  
No one knows the soul they carry,  
Nor what is evil nor what is good.  
(What distant anxiety nearby weeps?)

All is uncertain and ultimate  
All is sparse, nothing is whole.  
Oh, Portugal, today you are fog...  
It is Time!

Fernando Pessoa





Figure 1: Romains de la décadence (Thomas Couture 1847)

## **Abstract**

The thesis starts with a historical analysis of the development of depression as a concept. Through this inquiry, the controversies behind the apparent consensus about depression's etiology and treatment are illuminated, suggesting that the understanding of the climbing rates of depression in contemporary Western civilization is still up for grabs. That's what the thesis sets out to investigate. In order to accomplish this aim, the study builds upon the classical accounts of Georg Simmel, Émile Durkheim and the more contemporary ideas of Dany-Robert Dufour, in dialogue with an array of supplementary theoretical sources. Navigating through this 'sea' of extraordinary and different theories, a new avenue of reflections arises, contributing for the sophistication of the questions made about the phenomenon of depression's rates. The fundamental argument emerging from this theoretical undertaking is that 'crises of meaninglessness' that pervade the collective body of Western contemporary societies have, as one of its consequences, the expansion of depression rates. Meaninglessness in contemporary times is the primary object of investigation of the thesis. The concept, in the context of this study, is not understood as merely an effect of the historical decline of shared social norms due to processes of individualization. Rather, it is claimed, it originates from and is reinforced by the 'political-economic theology of neo-liberalism' which becomes virtually generalized in the West, erecting money as a God. The study concludes that by undermining culturally established values, ideals, institutions and principles that may block the dissemination of commodities this new transcendence has been challenging the task of signifying life, potentializing – among other subjective difficulties – the diffusion of depression.

## Introduction

The concern with the theme of the increasing prevalence of depression in contemporary societies is closely related to my professional background.

I have an undergraduate Degree in Psychology and my career path as a psychologist has been marked by an interest in the clinical and the sociological fields.

These two domains are, of course, deeply connected. The clinical psychologist deals with a 'being-in-the-world', a socially constituted individual. In my experience as a psychotherapist, it has always been clear that clinical understanding could only get perspective through sociological knowledge.

This perception led me to do the Masters in Psychosociology on the subject of jealousy in contemporary love relationships. Having at that time established a practice with people experiencing compulsive forms of jealousy, I realized that a deeper understanding of their discourse would be greatly potentialized through sociological sensitivity to the cultural environment within which their relationships were being constituted.

The research led to the conclusion, to state it briefly, that contemporary jealousy configures itself as a feeling and an attitude that seems to reveal and, somehow, to cope with the multiple, flexible and plural state of love relationships in conditions of social deregulation. Further, the study suggested that contemporary pathological forms of jealousy can be understood within societies which, in the West, become increasingly organized around consumerism and linked superficiality fueled by media discourses of ego-glorification and by a culture based on disposability of objects, experiences and, also, of people.

The move to depression as a topic of interest was, again, an effect of clinical concern with a problem surfacing with growing frequency in psychological practice and debate. In addition to this, the increased number of reports on the media (newspaper news, magazines, television programs, documentaries and so on) disseminating a reductionist biomedical view about depression – largely assimilated by lay people - started to capture my sociological imagination.

Regarding academic studies on depression in the psychiatric domain, I would soon find out, even though different and sometimes concurring theories were being advanced, the biomedical perspective has also been the dominating paradigm. That is, despite 'scientific controversies' on the physiological etiology of depression, both the media and the academy are disseminating the purportedly consensual idea that this is a

biological condition - more specifically, a chemical dysfunction of the brain - which, nowadays, can and should be treated through medication.

As we are going to analyze in the first chapters of the thesis, this is a false consensus. In reality, the whole discursive field wherein the phenomenon of depression is located is fragmented, composed by disputing perspectives and numerous inconclusive hypotheses.

The definitive understanding of depression - and its climbing rates in the contemporary epoch – is therefore, despite the apparent consensus, still up for grabs.

My purpose in resuming the debate is not, however, to overcome contradictions and reach any kind of definitive answer. I am not pursuing ultimate and generalizable responses. Rather, I believe (and expect) that this study may contribute to sophisticate the questions made, and enrich the explanations given thus far about the phenomenon of the rampant rates of depression in contemporary Western societies.

Indeed, I think that anyone searching for explanations should take the complexity of the depressive suffering with serious consideration.

Talking about his experience, Andrew Solomon touchingly expresses the hurting intensity of depressive pain:

In the tightest corner of my bed, split and racked by this thing no one else seemed to be able to see, I prayed to a God I had never entirely believed in, and I asked for deliverance. I would have been happy to die the most painful death, though I was too dumbly lethargic even to conceptualize suicide. Every second of being alive hurt me. Because this thing had drained all fluid from me, I could not even cry. My mouth was parched as well. I had thought that when you feel your worst your tears flood, but the very worst pain is the arid pain of total violation that comes after the tears are all used up, the pain that stops up every space through which you once metered the world, or the world, you. This is the presence of major depression (2001, p. 19).

Such a life-destroying agony should impose, I think, intellectual humility and watchfulness as to avoid forcing the reality of the illness – always subjective, certainly variable and pluri-determined – to fit into the moulds of a reductionist theoretical approach.

Nevertheless, new avenues of reflection should and need to be opened. First, because the above mentioned lack of sociological sensitivity that marks the dominating

views about depression rates has been muting a range of socially and politically meaningful questions. Second, the spreading ‘silence’ about the social and existential levels of depression is very much in line with and telling of the pathogenic aspects of the contemporary social order which, we claim, underlie depression’s expansion in Western civilization.

It is also important to remark that the thesis does not intend to understand the phenomenon of depression in all its aspects. Rather, the ensuing reflections are specific to the sociological profile of depression’s elevated rates, analyzing its significance within the collective state of affairs of Western contemporary societies.

Although the research privileges the sociological strand of concerns, we are not arguing that depression is, merely, a social effect. Rather, it would be better conceived as a phenomenon which is expressive of each individual as a whole. Within this always unique whole, the sociological aspect – acknowledging the fact that individuals are not only influenced but constituted within society – is one element interplaying with others in hardly separable interconnections.

Still, within this sociological level of analysis, I should remark that even though the thesis focuses on ‘crises of meaninglessness in contemporary Western societies’, the existence of disparate phenomena varying either cross-culturally within the West, or in different strata of a single society, is recognized.

The phenomenon of depression is not envisaged in this study as a self-contained and strictly defined experience that remains invariable independently of either individuals who suffer from them, or the plurality of cultural programs that change in resonance to time and space.

This means to conceive of depression as a particular experience for each unique individual who is experiencing it within each unique cultural context. Nevertheless, these experiences often preserve some commonality which constitute the ‘family resemblances’ that they share with one another.

Our aim is to investigate these “familiar resemblances” (Wittgenstein 2001) of ‘different depressions’, under sociological lens.

Another aspect to be considered is the thesis’ stance on the concept of depression *per se*. More specifically, the thesis’ viewpoint on the distinction between, on the one side, non-pathological kinds of depressive states – sometimes referred as ‘intense sadness / anguish’ and ‘alienation’ - and on the other, depression as a pathological disturbance.

This is a pressing issue for studies on depression. For any academic incursion on the theme is expected to answer questions such as: “what exactly does the term

‘depression’ stand for in this study?”; “is it referring to depression as a mood disorder in the manners defined by *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM)?”; “if not, how are the boundaries between pathological and non-pathological depressive experiences defined?”

In order to determine the thesis’ response to these questions, I need to introduce, here, a few observations that will be further developed in chapter 2.

First, I believe that the boundaries between a disordered (pathological) and a non-disordered (non-pathological) depressive state is an important step towards addressing fundamental medical and social issues. For instance, as Wakefield (1992) notes, such a boundary helps to establish the responsibilities of mental health professionals discriminating them from those specific to domains outside the medical field. Thus, the definition of what is pathological is fundamental in order to avoid – or at least to resist against - the socially troublesome and economically onerous medicalization of non-pathological mental states.

There is a second, more controversial issue on the demarcation between ‘pathological’ and ‘normal’ depressive experiences. An influential perspective on this regard is represented by Allan V. Horwitz and Jerome C. Wakefield. The authors defend the view that pathological depression is a result of a malfunctioning psychological mechanism as designed by nature, acknowledging, however, that what is deemed a disorder varies in each cultural setting in accordance with specific societal values (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007). In contrast, when depressive symptoms emerge in response to social factors, not being associated to a natural malfunctioning, they argue, what is at stake is a non-pathological depressive state. The argument is more sophisticated than this, and we will have the opportunity to elaborate on it later.

Important here is to say that the thesis adopts a sociological perspective that cancels the dichotomy between individual and society. From such a point of view, all individual experiences occur in a constitutive collective background. Hence, either intense sadness, other different forms of non-pathological anguish, alienation etc., or a more rigid-type of pathological depression are equally constituted within a social scenario that not only influences but constitutes these experiences.

In sum, even though we concede that the conceptual discrimination between pathological and non-pathological forms of depression has clinical and social value, the social factors we will analyze here underlie both types. The following sociological analysis applies, thereby, for either pathological or non-pathological depressive experiences.

Having clarified such peripheral aspects, I can now turn to issues lying at the core of this study.

The initial questions capturing my sociological imagination would sound like this: If there is a 'social voice' to be restituted to the growing number of diagnosed depression in our time, which voice is this? What is this phenomenon saying (both as an experience that is becoming increasingly common and as a concept prevalently defined as a biological condition)?

At the back of my mind, a more specific question was: If compulsive jealousy - as my previous investigation suggested - should be sociologically understood as a kind of adaptive response to conditions of plurality and openness, how should depression be perceived in such a context? In other words, if a person dominated by intense jealousy is actively and compulsively attempting to fill her relationship with control and predictability, what are the increasing rates of depressive suffering 'telling' us? What are depressed people attempting to say – although silently and (apparently) in a passive way - about our life in common through their barely speakable pain that often makes action seem impossible?

A cluster of insightful theoretical accounts from both classical and more contemporary scholars were the fundamental tools that, carefully handled, helped me to open the way through the 'silence'.

Notably, the classical accounts of Georg Simmel, Émile Durkheim and the more contemporary ideas of Dany-Robert Dufour were continuous 'theoretical pointers' along this path, in dialogue with many other secondary but equally important theoretical sources. These sources ranged from the domain of social theory (authors such as Alain Ehrenberg, Richard Sennett, Christopher Lash, Philip Rieff, Charles Taylor, Nikolas Rose, Hartmut Rosa and others) to the domain of philosophy and literature (Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács, Fyodor Dostoyevsky), the anthropological and historical domains (Mary Douglas and Mircea Eliade).

To navigate into this 'sea' of extraordinary, but sometimes contradictory (or even concurring) ideas was in no way an easy task, demanding necessary discriminations and the continuous need to determine, check and sometime rectify my own point of view after new discoveries. But it was certainly a pleasing and enriching theoretical journey. Progressively, the construction of a new avenue of reflections was taking shape.

The central theme that emerged from this inquiry in search for the sociological profile of depression in contemporary Western civilizations was the issue of meaning.

Meaninglessness – although not being explicitly referred in the *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM V)<sup>1</sup> – returns over and over in the discourse of people experiencing depression. As one finds in Elizabeth Wurtzel's memoir:

That's the thing I want to make clear about depression: It's got nothing at all to do with life. In the course of life, there is sadness and pain and sorrow, all of which, in their right time and season, are normal -- unpleasant, but normal. Depression is an altogether different zone because it involves a complete absence: absence of affect, absence of feeling, absence of response, absence of interest. The pain you feel in the course of a major clinical depression is an attempt on nature's part (nature, after all, abhors a vacuum) to fill up the empty space. But for all intents and purposes, the deeply depressed are just the walking, waking dead (1997, p. 19).

Or again, with Andrew Solomon:

In depression, the meaninglessness of every enterprise and every emotion, the meaninglessness of life itself, becomes self-evident. The only feeling left in this loveless state is insignificance (2001, p. 15).

The thesis is thus a sociological theoretical effort towards understanding the growing emergence of life-destroying feelings of meaninglessness throughout society - manifested, among other pathological forms, and perhaps most explicitly, in the burgeoning rates of depression.

The basic idea underlying such an inquiry is that when some people, at some point of their lives, feel engulfed by sentiments of life's insignificance that underlies depressive pain, both subjective and collective elements are in question.

For issues of significance and meaning – as we will see in greater length in chapter 4 – involve not only personal choices and private perspectives (as the current dominating discourse about values articulates). Rather, they are rooted within the socially constituted narratives in which individuals find the answers for the questions of meaning and reasons for action.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Manual, the issue is implicit in what is described as an essential feature of Major Depressive Episode: "Loss of interest or pleasure is nearly always present, at least to some degree. Individuals may report feeling less interested in hobbies, "not caring anymore," or not feeling any enjoyment in activities that were previously considered pleasurable" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).



The thesis will thus theoretically elaborate a sociological understanding of contemporary civilizations that aims to analyze why ‘crises of meaninglessness’ - sometimes leading to depression - have been emerging in increasing frequency in Western contemporary civilizations. In other words, the thesis aim is, primarily, to analyse the conditions underpinning the alleged ‘crises of meaninglessness’ that pervades the contemporary Western civilization. Secondly, it intends to examine whether depression figures, in such a context, as one of the typical subjective ‘responses’.

From the outset, it is necessary to remark that these reflections don’t subscribe to a view of the contemporary epoch as a time when historical processes altered the structures of Western societies to a point wherein any dominant pattern of culture is able to impose itself and thus, a time when the minimum basis for meaning is lacking.

Drawing on Simmel’s sensibility for the molecular processes of life, and avoiding the temptations of ordered but over-simplified views, the thesis acknowledges that if self-centeredness, egoism, competitiveness, consumerism, limitlessness and forms of symbolic impoverishment due to the blurring of ideals and values can be recognized as part of the contemporary experience, this is not the whole picture. Rather, the dedication to collective concerns, feelings of commonness and other socially binding motors such as ‘giving’ and ‘gratitude’ – the latter being used here in Simmel’s sense of the “... moral memory of humanity” (Simmel 1950, p. 388) – still provide some stability to the fluid world of contemporary social relations.

Further, as chapter 7 brings to discussion, the thesis concedes the moral potential of individualism. However, the fact that contemporary agents live in a cultural habitat wherein they are expected (at least in principle) to be authentic, flexible and autonomous (Ehrenberg 2010b; Honneth 2004; Petersen 2011; Sennett 1978) should not be too hastily understood as an unproblematic move from discipline to freedom and absolute contingency.

Conversely, behind ‘liberation’, a new scheme of control and social domination - one of a very different type, based more on seduction than on suppression - and a new set of norms (or ‘dogmas’) arises.

After the waning of the transcendent authority of the divine as the fundamental source of pre-modern meaning and the subsequent exhaustion of the so-called ‘modern dream of progress’, the vacuum of transcendental answers for the problem of meaning has been filled by a “political-economic-theology” (Keohane & Kuhling 2014). This move means, in a very specific sense, that pre-modern religious transcendence is back with us, wearing new secular masks.

This ‘theological return’ was anticipated by Georg Simmel’s classical accounts on money as “the modern God” (Simmel 2005) and, more recently, radicalized in what has been analyzed by Dany-Robert-Dufour (2009) as the “divine market”. The so-called ‘religion’ has its sacred commandments and, historically, it had its “evangelists”- figures such as Smith, Becker, Friedman, and others - who in one way or another raised the banner of individual freedom as the sacrosanct rule, glorified Money as the new omnipotent God and the market as its inviolable temple.

In the new spreading religion of the money-God, if the ‘rationality of money’ and the ideal of a (purportedly) free, sovereign individual are sacralized, all values and ideals which do not survive by virtue of this rationality – and sometimes threaten to clash with it - are profaned.

This is, by way of introduction, the analytical framework within which the research problem emerges.

## **Research question**

How ‘crises of meaninglessness’ pervading the contemporary Western civilization should be analysed in its conditions and underpinnings? And as a correlate of this primary and general question: How the rising prevalence of depression in the contemporary West can be understood as one of the consequences of such crises?

## **The structure of the thesis**

In order to address the research problem, the thesis is organized in 9 chapters and a conclusion.

The study starts, in chapter 1, with the delineation of depression as a concept, analyzing the controversies behind the apparent consensus about depression’s etiology. The chapter progresses to a brief genealogy of the concept of depression within the psychiatric field, analyzing the historical paths through which the understanding of depression was fundamentally transformed.

In chapter 2, the main explanatory accounts for the expansion of depression rates in contemporary times are presented and analyzed. Closing the chapter, the thesis’ perspective on the subject is established.

Chapter 3 deals with some fundamental analytical issues underpinning the task of understanding and explaining depression in ‘western contemporary civilization’. Towards

this objective, the chapter starts by outlining the general lines of the debate about whether the present era should be seen as a completely distinct epoch from modernity or as an intensification / radicalization of modern patterns, spelling out the thesis' specific stand on the issue. Next, we analyze the crises and controversies in epistemology reflected in the philosophical debates surrounding the question of 'postmodernism' in its interplays with resurgent positivism, empiricism and reductive biologism in the 'age of the brain'. In the context of these debates, the epistemological perspective adopted in the thesis is outlined.

Chapter 4 is central for the subsequent developments of the thesis' argument. The chapter devises a sociological understanding of notions such as 'meaning', 'meaningfulness' and 'meaninglessness', elaborating upon the foundational accounts on the subject by Simmel, Durkheim and, secondarily but also importantly, Benjamin.

In chapter 5, the historical understanding of the shifts in the collective order of meaning from Greek times to Modernity is pursued. Within this broader analysis, the chapter deals with the shifting representations of melancholy in its relations with the order of meaning culturally dominant in each period. This latter step will help to substantiate the subsequent discussion on how current views about depression reveal recent vicissitudes of the contemporary order of meaning.

Chapter 6 focuses on the fissures suffered by the modern order of meaning in the heart of the eighteenth century Enlightenment and further, in Romanticism. Following this, some representative modern intellectual formulations and reactions to the problem of meaning in the modern epoch are analyzed, as philosophically elaborated in the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche and György Lukács in dialogue with the classical sociological accounts of Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel.

Chapter 7 deals with the transformations affecting the collective order of meaning in contemporary times. Elaborating on the anthropological idea of the 'sacred' as a foundation of meaningfulness – by building upon the ideas of Douglas and Eliade – the chapter analyzes the ways by which 'sacredness' (and thus, meaning) become challenged in contemporary times. Still, it argues against totalizing perspectives on meaninglessness which promote an understanding of the contemporary epoch as a time when meaning becomes radically fragmented, leading to inherently limitless and meaningless lives. These discussions set out the basis for the thesis' particular understanding on the notion of 'contemporary meaninglessness'.

Chapter 8 develops the idea that spreading 'crises of meaninglessness' emerge under the effects of the political-economic theology of neo-liberalism, whereby the ideal

of a self-referential individuality and the pragmatic principles inherent to the money rationality acquire Supreme worth. Meaninglessness is thus generated and fueled in a context wherein 'sacred limits' - under the guise of cultural forms and social ideals - and the intrinsic worth of various phenomena are either converted into cash value or actively rejected as 'heresies' against the new religion of the money-God.

Chapter 9 elaborates on the idea of depression as a social pathology of meaninglessness in the contemporary culture of the money-God. The chapter is composed of two fundamental sections. In the first section, building upon the ideas of Julia Kristeva, we start by depicting the depressive experience as a crisis of symbolization fostered by the faith of the money-God. The next step is to analyze the relationship between this 'new faith' and the 'contemporary experience of time' in its consequences for meaninglessness and depression. Following this, the second section analyzes the mainstream biomedical mode of thinking about depression as a phenomenon that simultaneously reveals and reinforces broader crises of meaninglessness.

The conclusion is structured in four parts. First, it ties together the main analytical findings of the thesis. Second, some of the ways by which the experience of meaningfulness can incarnate in the contemporary epoch are explored through a brief analysis of Andrew Solomon's biographical trajectory - especially in the last stages of his experience with depression and after his recovery. Third, the limitations of the study are identified, pointing towards some worthwhile aspects of the project to be investigated in the future. The section ends with some considerations on the thesis' contributions, analyzing, in a succinct manner, how they contradict or amplify existing theories on the theme.

## Chapter 1: A Brief Genealogy of Depression

### 1.1 - What is depression? Controversies behind the consensus

The increase in the rates of depression is, today, a fact pictured by several statistical and epidemiological studies<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, psychiatry is still struggling for answers able to understand the complexities of the illness, with its controversies around definition, etiology and treatment. Thus far, all simplistic answers have proved to be insufficient.

Paradoxically, depression begins to become coherent and consensual in the social imaginary, being conceived as a problem related mostly to the state of our brains. As has been analyzed by several scholars (Currie 2005; Gardner 2003; Healy 2004b; Pignarre 2001) the dissemination of this conception echoes the dominant paradigm within the medical field, the effects of education campaigns among doctors or even direct-to-consumer marketing which, reinforced by media discourses, articulate a discursive reality of depression, associating it with chemical functioning, genetics and drugs.

However, notwithstanding the significant advances in brain science of the last decades, the controversies involving the causes of depression are far from being solved. Rather, the physical etiology of depression remains unknown. The physiological or genetically-based explanation sometimes associated with the functionality of serotonin or norepinephrine neurotransmission remains grounded in assumptions and vague indicatives. As admitted by several scholars of the field (Gilbert 1992; Hansen 2005; Healy 2004b; Horwitz & Wakefield 2007; Radden 2003), the link between depression and the lowering of neurotransmitter levels, as well as its genetic determination - although broadly accepted by the public and noticed by consumer literature<sup>3</sup> and by the media as scientific facts - are in reality controversial hypotheses. No abnormality of serotonin or other substance in depression has ever been demonstrated (Healy 2004b; Pignarre 2001). Concerning genetics, Gardner (2003), in reporting Papolos and Papolos 1997 study, notes that even though it is usually admitted that genetic research has yielded some indications that the *potential* to develop depression is passed through genes, there is no proof of genetic determinism.

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<sup>2</sup> As it has been widely disseminated by several studies, magazines and newspapers, the World Health Organization estimates that, until 2020, depression will become the second main cause of morbidity in the industrialized world after cardiovascular diseases. More detailed statistic data will be provided later in this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> This is a term used by Paula Gardner (2003) to refer to prominent depression manuals addressed to the general public.

David Healy, an Irish psychopharmacologist, a practicing psychiatrist and historian of psychiatry, understands that the propagation of the hypothesis of ‘depression as chemical imbalance’ as a fact is the result of a very successful marketing of antidepressants. Although abnormality of serotonin in depression has never been demonstrated, the fact that the marketing of antidepressants has emphasized that they increase the neurotransmitter’s levels feeds the idea of depression as a lowering of serotonin in the brain (Healy 2004b).

So, insofar as fluoxetine, which inhibits the reuptake of serotonin, also appears to alleviate depression (whether minor or major), some authors reason (Kramer 1993; Rego 2005) that serotonin reuptake causes depression. Obviously enough, however, the fact that a drug affects the amount of serotonin available leading to mental relief does not entail that the distress was being caused by a deficiency in serotonin, nor even that its cause is somehow associated to a malfunction of the brain (Radden 2003). Since there is no sufficient evidence to justify that serotonin deficiency causes depression, this kind of reasoning constitutes what Hansen terms “the post-hoc fallacy” (2005, p. 132). Radden concurs, noting that the fallacy of this reasoning is made clear when we think that it equals saying that because drinking alcohol eases stress after a ‘difficult day’, alcohol deficiency is the underlying cause of stress (Radden 2003, p. 45).

Media discourses have a significant part in the propagation of these myths, tending to reify dominant research paradigms, while ignoring the controversies and contradictory studies that pervades the field. For instance, the controversy triggered by facts such as the existence of other new antidepressants which successfully treated depression without significantly inhibiting *either* serotonin or norepinephrine. Even more impacting are the reports about the newer tricyclic antidepressant Tianeptine that does the exact opposite of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI) drugs, enhancing rather than preventing serotonin reuptake, but is still effective. The media don’t give much attention to these reports (Gardner 2003, p. 113).

Behind the myths, what justify the chemical treatment of depression are not physiological alterations upon which the medication will operate and restore, but simply its prospective effects.

The ‘chemical-imbalance myth’ has, admittedly, its functions. In respect to the practical advantages of the biological view of depression, Horwitz and Wakefield note that the afflicted individuals themselves often feel that by recognizing their illness as a medical entity, they get medical help more easily. Psychologically, they add, defining

oneself as a victim of an actual illness provides a more acceptable account of one's problems (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, p. 216).

Thus, despite controversies, the mythology of 'biological depression' perpetuates, blurring the fact that the understanding of depression is still up for grabs.

## **1.2 – The conceptualization of depression in the psychiatric field: historical developments**

The history of a disorder we know today as depression begins in the modern era, concomitantly with the wane of the notion of melancholia in psychiatric circles and the linked yearning for making psychiatry scientific.

Alain Ehrenberg, in his influential book *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* (2010b) points out that towards the end of the nineteenth century, the reference to melancholia within psychiatric treatises starts to lose importance.

The German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin had an important role in this historical change. In his *Manual of Psychiatry*, published in 1899, Kraepelin included the concept of manic-depressive psychosis, in which melancholia is embedded. From there, melancholia as a morbid, discrete entity is removed from the psychiatric nosography (Vertzman 1995).

Emil Kraepelin, considered by some as the founder of the modern scientific psychiatry, as well as of psychopharmacology and psychiatric genetics, was contemporaneous of scholars such as Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud. Throughout his career, Kraepelin attempted to classify, categorize and describe psychiatric disorders, anticipating the current dominant models for identification of mental disorders. Yet, by the time he developed his work, it seemed clear to him that the brain was the seat of emotions, thought and behaviour. This perspective helped to bring mental disturbances firmly in the hands of medicine (Gilbert 1992) which would, later, profoundly affect the views on depression.

A second historical force in the promotion of psychiatry as an integral part of medicine and of scientific modernity affecting views on depression is signaled by Alain Ehrenberg (2010b). According to him, between the world wars, psychiatrists observed that electroshock therapy had had some success treating melancholia, which meant that for the first time, somatic and psychic aspects of mental illness became intertwined. However, Ehrenberg stresses that whereas electroshock showed that biological treatments

work, they had not brought any definitive answer for the causes of melancholy. This would thus set an issue with which psychiatry has been constantly struggling with: “...we heal better and better, perhaps, but we cannot agree either about what we are healing or about the effectiveness of the treatment” (Ehrenberg 2010b, p. 68).

After the impulse granted by electroshocks treatments, the launching of Meprobamate under the brand name Milltown in 1955 was a watershed in psychiatry’s development as a scientific area: it produced relaxation without unduly sedating (Healy 2004b). The antidepressant story takes a further important step in 1957 with the discovery of imipramine and the monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI) Iproniazid. However, in the beginning of antidepressants history, the pharmaceutical companies involved had little interest in an antidepressant and did nothing to promote either of these drugs. Besides, very few clinicians in office practice at the time seemed to encounter depression (Healy 2004b, p. 7).

In the 1950s decade, psychiatry already had a diagnostic manual, the first version of the DSM (*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), produced long ago in 1918. This manual was marked by influences brought about by psychoanalysis and the social communitarian psychiatry. Under the important influence of Adolf Meyer (1866-1950), there was a predominance of psychodynamic categories and an emphasis on the opposition between neurosis and psychosis. Opposing fundamental aspects of the perspective proposed by Kraepelin, Meyer’s diagnostic rationality was based on types of reactions to difficult life problems. For the general psychiatric thinking of those days, influenced by Meyer, the patient would be better understood if his life situation were taken into consideration (Dunker & Neto 2011; Horwitz 2002).

The DSM-I, and also the DSM-II, published in 1952, weren’t based on elaborated classification schemes. In the first two manuals, symptoms, in themselves, didn’t reveal disease entities but disguised underlying conflicts that could not be expressed directly. However, disclosing the nascent yearning for the scientific understanding of mental disorders, the manual’s second version already demonstrated a greater affinity with the biological perspective (Dunker & Neto 2011).

In this context, bit by bit medications were gaining social respectability within psychiatry. However, in the end of the 1960’s decade, several controversies still dominated the field: antidepressants were still seen as mere tools for the treatment, not addressing the central concern of psychiatrists at the time: causes (Ehrenberg 2010b).

Generally speaking, the psychiatric mindset of the later 1960s pictured depression as an entity divided in different classifications, which varied as functions of its



etiology. The endogenous depression lacked any psychological causes, being therefore an exclusively biological entity. Exogenous depression, in turn, was subdivided in two: exogenous depression (unleashed by a recent external event) and neurotic / psychogenic depression (associated with unconscious conflicts). Furthermore, depression was understood as a syndrome, that is, a cluster of symptoms that would appear either in neurotic or psychotic structures (Gilbert 1992).

In the late 1960s, however, new tensions emerged which would profoundly transform these conceptions, leading to the definitive establishment of psychiatry as an integral part of medicine.

Part of these tensions stemmed from the critiques raised by the ‘antipsychiatry movement’, questioning the legitimacy of psychiatric diagnoses and treatments and associating psychiatry with the authoritarian extension of the state (Healy 2004b; Mayes & Horwitz 2005).

Further, psychiatrists needed to demonstrate that their practice produced fundamentally different and superior results to those of psychologists and social workers in order to attain privileged coverage by health insurance companies (Hale 1995, cited in Mayes & Horwitz 2005, p. 257).

Finally, some currents within the research-oriented psychiatrists insisted that the discipline needed to invest on diagnostic reliability through a more objective demarcation of the different mental disorders. This should be met by a new approach to research wherein attention would turn from etiology to the symptoms that compose each disorder and the optimal treatment to alleviate them. Therefore, where specific etiologies could not be empirically ascertained, they should not be attributed to any cause at all (Mayes & Horwitz 2005, p. 256).

The confluence of these pressures led to the publication in 1980 of the DSM-III, generally considered a watershed in the psychiatric profession. A new form of standardization of psychiatric diagnosis was introduced and, following that, a wholly new understanding of mental illnesses, in general, and of depression, in particular, would emerge.

Through the abdication of the search for underlying causes, the manual evoked a new method of psychiatric nosology: descriptivism, in which a neutral depiction of mental disturbances is sought without recourse to any specific theoretical framework. According to the basic tenets of the so influential ‘descriptive psychiatry’ – which became dominant after the twentieth century, characterizing either the DSM or the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD) - mental disorders are to be classified and

apprehended through observable symptoms. In the new dominant approach, concerns with psychopathology give place to concerns with supposedly neutral descriptions and quantitative apprehensions of symptoms.

According to Radden (2003), this does not mean that the descriptivist nosology denies the existence of causes, but simply that causes are no longer part of the reference to conceptualize mental disorders. Given that etiology of most mental disorders is still unknown, the reasoning underlying the DSM-III (and also its successors, the DSM-IV and the DSM-V) is that whether or not we know what causes depression (and other mental disorders), a descriptive classification can be a useful tool for the attempt to alleviate suffering brought about them (Hansen 2003). The DSM is intended thus, to be a reliable classificatory system that allows the superation of confusions in the scope of terminology, having any pretension to constitute itself as a psychopathology that looks into the psychic reality of the disturbances, its conditions and causes.

Nevertheless, whilst avoiding etiology-based classifications, the manual subscribes to a neo-Kraepelinian assumption that the core symptoms of mental disorders stemmed from some form of malfunctioning of the brain (Mayes & Horwitz 2005). Thus, behind the a-theoretical character of the manual, its classificatory system corresponds to the gradual ascension of biological psychiatry as a dominant strand in psychiatry.

Another novelty introduced by the DSM-III was the significant amplification of classifiable mental disturbances. Several new disorders were included in the manual, while the concept of neurosis, considered a vague and unscientific notion by many, was relegated to a very secondary place. Later, in the DSM-IV, it was going to be eliminated altogether (Healy 2004b). The contextual influences and social variants, in turn, which were formerly at the very core of the etiological understanding of the pathologies, became subsumed within the term “specific cultural syndromes” (Dunker & Neto 2011, p. 616, *my transl.*).

In respect to depression, the most visible consequence of the new psychiatric nosography was the removing of depressive syndromes from the categories of neurosis and psychosis. Further, as of the DSM-III, it was established that inasmuch as it was seemingly impossible to arrive at etiological conclusions in order to define the concepts of endogenous, exogenous and neurotic depression, these categories should be replaced by the notion of ‘major depression’, belonging to the cluster of mood disorders (Ehrenberg 2010b).

The fourth edition of the manual, published by The American Psychiatric Association (APA) in the 1990s decade (considered the “brain decade” by the WHO) is

said to have reaffirmed and solidified the transformation of psychiatry and mental health that the DSM-III began in 1980 (Mayes & Horwitz, 2005). The manual was designed, yet, to correspond with the codes used in the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*, 10th Revision (ICD-10) by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The same is true for the most recent edition of the manual: the DSM-V, launched in 2013. However, whilst the basic nosological paradigm underlying the two previous manuals is maintained, the DSM-V inaugurates specific shifts in relation to diagnostic categories.

Regarding depression, Horwitz (2010) depicts some changes that reinforce the already existing tendency of the two previous manuals to pathologize non-disordered depressive states. For instance, the removal of the 'bereavement exclusion' criterion from the diagnostic of a major depressive episode is, he claims, a problematic change. In basic terms, it entails that a person who meets the criteria for major depressive disorder will no longer be denied this diagnosis because she has recently lost a loved one. In light of this, Horwitz notes that since many people grieving a significant loss will exhibit the symptoms enlisted in the manual's diagnostic criteria for depression for two weeks (in addition to the fact that virtually everybody will be bereaved at some point in life), the change could pathologize large numbers of people<sup>4</sup>.

Other nosological shifts are found in the manual, as the inclusion of new depressive disorders, such as disruptive mood dysregulation disorder and premenstrual dysphoric disorder. Aside from that, little has changed in the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the DSM regarding the core symptoms (and its established duration) applied to the diagnostic of major depressive episode.

The DSM-V defines 'major depressive episodes' that make up a 'major depressive disorder' as a condition marked by depressed mood or loss of interest and pleasure for nearly all activities, changes in appetite or weight, sleep and psychomotor activity, decreased energy, tiredness, reduced feelings of worthlessness, guilt, exaggerated sense of responsibility for events outside the person's control, difficulty thinking, concentrating or taking decisions, memory difficulties, recurrent thoughts of death or suicidal ideation, plans or suicide attempts. Major Depressive Episodes also meet clinically significant

<sup>4</sup> At the time when Horwitz wrote this essay, the DSM-V has not yet been launched, which means that he was commenting on proposed (but not yet confirmed) alterations. The publication of DSM-V revealed that the 'bereavement exclusion' criterion was removed indeed from the diagnostic criteria for major depression. It's worth noticing that this criterion was replaced, in the new manual, by guidelines aiming to help the clinician to discriminate grief from major depression (even if the latter is a function of the grieving process).

impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning, being diagnosed in the presence of these symptoms (persisting for most of the day, nearly everyday) in a minimum of two consecutive weeks (American Psychiatric Association 2013).

### 1.2.1 - Brave new brains

*“And the poor ‘so-and-so’ who feels a mix of sadness, melancholy, dismay, apathy, lack of cheerfulness, of appetite of sexual desire, really thinks he is going mad. He has no idea – information – that he can have a hormonal imbalance of serotonin, a sedative and calming substance, which regulate the mood; and of dopamine and noradrenaline, which proportionate energy and disposition. Without them, or with some unbalance in them, you cannot be happy. Literally”<sup>5</sup>*

The message put forward by this script has become a chorus of every sort of media messages, awareness campaigns and books on depression. The quotation touches a key aspect of our analysis, namely, that depression today is no longer envisaged as an expression of “problems in living” (Szasz 1960). It became literal, an objective reality of our hormones and brain functioning, that is, something ultimately referred to (physical) facts.

Indeed, the wave of scientific depression that we have just started to describe has carried ‘issues of meaning’ away from the understanding and treatment of depression.

Recently, science advances heavily into depression through the development of a new fashionable field: neuroscience. Progress in the treatment of neurological disorders or the discovery of neuropathological aspects of mental illnesses no longer represents the whole project of neurosciences, which becomes increasingly more ambitious. Philosophically, it envisages the knowledge about the brain and about the subject as

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<sup>5</sup> *I take antidepressants, thanks God! Patients and doctors demystify psychiatric treatment* (Moraes 2008, cited in Kehl 2009, my transl.).

forming a single unity, propelling the fusion between neurology and psychiatry (Ehrenberg 2009, p. 189).

However, our 'brave new brains' (Andreasen 2001) are still a somewhat unknown land and the association between psychiatry and neurology is not free of major tensions. Even though a great part of the academic psychiatric literature share the excitement brought about by the new technologies which, hopefully soon, will purportedly allow the discovery of a sort of "penicillin for mental illness" (Andreasen 2001, p. xi), critical voices are also heard.

Psychiatry professor Thomas Fuchs, for instance, offers an explanation of depression in terms of mind as distributed among the brain, body, and environment. He claims that neurobiology's restricted field of vision should be rejected by psychiatrists. He is critical of neurobiology's tendency to regard subjectivity as a by-product of the brain's activity and also of the idea that subjective states, such as depression, are localizable in the brain (Fuchs 2002, p. 261).

As Gardner (2003) notes, brain imaging technology is at the centre of the confusions. The visualization of the processing of information by centers in the brain is frequently linked to the assumption that the cause of mental illness is, essentially, of a cerebral character. However, the fact that researchers can see differences between depressed and non-depressed brains images and biochemical levels, in no way indicates that depression is a biological illness, starting from the fact that these changes can be a *result* of depressed states rather than a cause. Despite of this, conclusions about the determinant biological root of depression abound, which, according to Gardner (2003), is possible only by alienating many variables, assuming a biased mode of thought based on the biopsychiatric paradigm.

Fuchs (2002) counters the equalization between the mind and the brain by claiming that, on the phenomenological level, a 'mental event' cannot, in any circumstances, be isolated from the world and from the stream of conscious experiences which is always intentional, that is, a consciousness of something in the world.

Providing concreteness to this critique, Ehrenberg (2009, p. 197) reasons that even if a biological mediation to a certain emotion (such as jealousy or guilt) is found in the molecular level, the neuronal web would only be triggered if the subject finds reasons to be jealous about someone or guilt about something. These reasons can be true or false, concrete or illusive, but they emerge in a relationship with someone in a certain environment.

This may seem obvious. However, the idea that the mind exists only embedded in the world and in the temporal process of life is becoming increasingly fuzzy in hegemonic psychiatric thinking. In fact, one of the effects brought about by the confluence between neurology and psychiatry is the conception of the mind as a cerebral effect (Andreasen 2001), reducing it as an object of biomedicine's study and treatment (Gardner 2003).

This sort of equalization between the subject and the biological body, remarks Ehrenberg (2009), implies a particular type of subjectivity in which the criterion of the mental is interiority (represented by the internal neuronal mechanisms of the brain) and not signification. Returning to Ehrenberg's example, signification is undermined when the future prospects on the biological determination of jealousy or depression neglects the (social and moral) facts that we will continue to find reasons for feeling jealous and depressive independently of this understanding.

In the particular case of depression, the so-called "biology of the spirit" (Ehrenberg 2009, p. 179) is tellingly evident. Progressively, the previous existential and moral concerns in regard to melancholia tend to be displaced - in the discourses of health practitioners and even of people diagnosed with depression - by worries related to the biological body.

Brain-centered explanations for depression are, still, typically associated with the valuing of antidepressant as the most efficient resource to address the disorder. Here lies another seemingly inexhaustible terrain for theoretical disputes to unfold.

In my opinion, any discussion on the validity of antidepressants use should start from admitting that the antidepressant's success indicates, at least to some extent, the positive effects that they have for *some* of the people shattered by depression.

As Styron's famous words in *Darkness Visible* (1990) express, when you feel yourself going downward to a dark pit of pain, when words become spasmodic and voice faint, when the libido is gone as well as appetite (often degraded into mere subsistence obligation), when sleepless nights is combined with exhaustion, everything has any savor and, after living this miserable life for months without stop, if medication works, it is very much understandable that people say 'medication saved my life'.

There are, however, many idiosyncrasies for each individual case. The psychiatrist David Healy (2004b), for instance, who defines himself as being committed to pharmacotherapy, points out that there is plenty of evidence that antidepressants can be shown to do something in the short term but almost no evidence that things turn out better in the long run.

Similarly, Gardner (2003) remarks that scientists themselves admit they are still unsure how antidepressants work and, even though manuals on depression often fail to inform, many widely promoted drugs have not been tested for long-term use. He also reports studies that tested an array of new antidepressants (including SSRI's) indicating that 62% of consumers showed no response to the drug, while other studies favored psychotherapy over drugs (Gardner 2003, p. 116). Yet, several studies claim that the efficacy of placebos in comparison to SSRIs is so strong that the pharmacological rationale for the treatment is undermined (Healy 2004b; Ussher 2010).

Phenomenologically, the euphoria with medication, as many users testify, is rarely abiding. Often faster than expected, it gives way to frustration, chronicity or to a long and wearing trial and error process in search for the best drug.

Ehrenberg (2010b) remarks that antidepressant's success is also linked to the weakness of theory in contemporary psychiatry. This weakness fuels the objective nosology based on the collection of symptoms listed in the psychiatric manuals, which ideally corresponds to the objectivity of the physical body (Martins 2008). Lacking a conclusive theory, psychiatry focuses on the somatic body, searching for legitimacy through the purported 'quick fix of medication'.

Now, antidepressants (and neurosciences) are powerful sources of hope towards the control of mental pain. Assumedly, by transforming suffering and mental pain into an objective and verifiable fact, neuroscience would be responsible for the grand feat of releasing individuals from the incalculable, sometimes overwhelming nature of our psychological lives. However, this model has still to prove its validity and there are some realistic motifs to think it will fail to do so.

At this point, the concrete expression of this difficulty suffices to defend this claim: hitherto, some years after the 'brave new world' discovered and celebrated by neurosciences, its rationality of factual precision is still far from being able to fully comprehend or heal the supposed brain dysfunction that leads to one of the greatest problems of our era: depression. On the contrary, we have good reasons to believe that things are getting worse.

For despite the marvels achieved by technology, we still witness several, and often tragic social embodiments of our human, fundamental vulnerability, as epitomized by today's 'epidemic depression'.

## Chapter 2: Understanding depression epidemics

### 2.1 - Introductory remarks

By 1996, the *World Health Organization* had reported that depression was the second greatest source of disability on the planet, being surpassed only by cardiac disease. According to Healy (2004c), the response from psychiatry to the news appeared to be satisfaction that the discipline would acquire now greater importance.

A typical explanation for this is that the staggering growth in depression rates is in fact a motif of satisfaction, the direct result of improvement in diagnostic methods and treatment.

For instance, a paper cited in the North-American journal *Archives of General Psychiatry* (publicized in a Brazilian newspaper in 2007) estimates that the number of children and adolescents diagnosed with ‘bipolar disorder’ in the United States has grown 40 times in a time span of 9 years (between 1994 and 2003). According to the psychiatrists interviewed, this growth merely indicates that a previously undiagnosed condition is now identified and treated. In regard to Brazilian rates, another newspaper article, in the same issue, suggests that the lower increase in the number of bipolar children and adolescents in the country is due to the lack of diagnosis. Even so, in the Department of Psychiatry for children and adolescents in the Hospital of São Paulo, the number of patients jumped from 22, in 1995, to 135, in 2007 (Kehl 2009a, p. 51).

But the change in diagnostic practices is by no means the only explanation for the increased rates of depression in contemporary times. Rather, scholars from various fields, ranging from mental health, bioethics, philosophy of the mind, social work, sociology, amongst others, have been presenting different approaches to the phenomenon.

In this section, we are going to briefly analyze some of the explanatory accounts for the inflated rates of depression in contemporary times and specify how the research locates itself within the big picture. From the start, it’s worth noticing that our objective is not to oppose any of these explanations in order to impose, over it, a superior account of the so-called depression epidemic.

Nevertheless, we should also state the thesis’ argument: beyond elements that may foster an overestimation of depression’s cases, depression is (in all its extensions and possibly misdiagnosed forms) a concrete expression of contemporary suffering.



## 2.2 - What statistics and epidemiologic studies tell us about the contemporary epidemic of depression?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), globally, more than 350 million people of all ages suffer from depression, being the second leading cause of disability worldwide – in terms of years lost to disability - surpassed only by heart disease (World Health Organization 2012).

It's worth stressing, here, that these estimations are based on standardized diagnostic criteria, such as those as laid out in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) and the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (ICD). These criteria, as we've seen above, imply a view of depression as a dysfunction that can be objectively defined and measured, while issues concerning subjective perceptions, or culture are not taken into account as a major concern.

Casting doubt over the theory of a 'world-wide epidemic', many scholars have claimed (Marsella 1978; Kleinman & Good 1985) that several ethno-cultural groups do not demonstrate any of the psychological components of depression associated with its presence among Western individuals. In this regard, Ussher (2010) in reference to the work of Marecek (2006) notes that "... suffering is signified by bodily or psychological complaints as varied as chest pains (China), burning on the soles of the feet (Sri Lanka), semen loss (India), ants crawling inside the head (Nigeria) or soul-loss (Hmong)" (Ussher 2010, p. 10).

Radden (2003) remarks that only a causal analysis, which posits a common (usually biological) underlying state serving to unify these disparate traits, allows the consideration of non-Western mental disturbances as cases of depression. Given that this biological underlying state is still a hypothesis, causal analysis cannot substantiate conclusions about the prevalence of depression in different cultures.

Jane M. Ussher, in *Are We Medicalizing Women's Misery? A Critical Review of Women's Higher Rates of Reported Depression* (2010) also observes that a bio-determinist perspective seem to interfere with the credibility of many epidemiological studies. Associated to it, she argues, there is a strong tendency to de-politicize the roots of distress (in the case of women highly conditioned by gender inequalities) neutralizing differences and downplaying complexities by conceiving depression as an objective entity that can be easily measured.

In effect, echoing and disseminating the ‘medical objectivism’ that pervades the field, widespread epidemiological conclusions picture depression as a unitary, global, trans-historical pathology (Pilgrim & Bentall 1999), whilst different symptomatic expressions, moral significations and causal specificities that vary not only from person to person but cross-culturally are dismissed and mistakenly amalgamated under the expression ‘world-wide epidemic’.

And whilst the view of a ‘world-wide epidemic’ can be interpreted as a signal of progress in terms of the amelioration of diagnostic techniques and its democratization, it may also blind people to other culturally specific aspects of the phenomenon and to broader processes of pathologisation of ‘problems in living’.

Another questionable aspect of epidemiological data on depression is the fact that most studies lack reference to contextual factors. For instance, Horwitz and Wakefield (2007) cite a study which estimates that, in the United States, Major Depression afflicts about 10% of adults each year and nearly a fifth of the population at some point in their lives, a number that is steadily growing. In outpatient settings, treatment of depression increased by 300% between 1987 and 1997. Also in the domain of psychotherapy the rising number of depressed patients is asserted. The overall percentage of the population in treatment for depression in a particular year saw an increase of 76% in just 20 years.

Horwitz and Wakefield (2007) are, however, skeptical in relation to the methodological criteria behind these results. Ignoring contextual conditionings, they claim, these studies amplify depression’s boundaries for its inability to distinguish situational depressive moods from pathological depression.

Beyond methodological issues, the amplification of depression’s boundaries is fueled, even further, by the broader cultural tendency to pathologise human difficulties and problems (often of moral and/or existential character), interpreting them through psychological, psychiatric and/or biomedical terms (Brinkmann 2013).

Currie (2005, p. 12) also questions the accuracy of epidemiological data on depression. According to the author, high depression prevalence rates on epidemiological studies are often the effect generated by simplified screening methods or diagnostic checklists (often created and funded by drug companies). These popular diagnostic tests are then conveniently used to demonstrate to the public, healthcare providers and funders that depression is not only common but under-treated.

Another important aspect highlighted by epidemiology is that urbanization, the increase in social anomie, changes in family structure and the weakening of traditional

sexual roles all contributed to the rising incidence of depression in our societies (Ehrenberg 2010b; Radden 2007).

For some commentators, as for instance Radden (2007), these results reveal, once again, a flawed conceptual distinction separating the depressive states that are pathological from those that are normal responses to misfortune. Nevertheless, the fact remains that many epidemiological studies point out a general increase of depressive experiences (pathological or not) in conditions of social upheaval.

Ehrenberg (2010b) summarizes some of the many different approaches to the understanding of the statistical data on depression. He asks: “Do such figures suggest an increased occurrence of this pathology? A tendency to consult a doctor more frequently for a psychological problem? A change in diagnostic practices?” (2010b, p. 109).

As mentioned in the very beginning of this chapter, exclusive answers for such a multifaceted issue tend to be simplistic.

### **2.3 - The era of depression as a problem of method**

Among the theoretical accounts that attempt to explain the recent increase on depression, Horwitz and Wakefield (2007), as hinted above, stand out as representatives of the argument that this growth is a single result of the blurred conceptual distinction between sadness as normal suffering, and depression as a disordered response of the organism.

The authors’ basic claim is that a new definition of depressive disorder that is flawed combined with other societal developments has dramatically expanded the domain of the presumed disorder. Depression’s rising rates are, therefore, according to them, more an artefact of these mistaken criteria (that also underlies epidemiological studies) associated with vested interests, than a factual reality.

Their thinking is, yet, centrally based on a critique of the DSM’s assumption that symptoms alone can dictate whether an individual has a mental disorder or not, independently of the context in which they emerge. Because of DSM’s symptom-based nature, they note, sadness responses involving enough of the symptoms specified in the manual, for at least two weeks, will be misclassified as disordered depression (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, p. 106).

Contradictorily, the DSM does have a definition for mental disorders. The manual presupposes that a disorder is derived from a dysfunction in the individual and it is not an expectable response to a stressor (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, p. viii), an assumption with

which Horwitz and Wakefield basically agree. However, problems start when natural responses to stressors – which do not represent dysfunctions – are rarely taken into account in the manual's formulation of the diagnostic criteria for the disorders. As a result, psychiatrists are led to diagnose as depression every condition that corresponds to the defined cluster of symptoms independently of being a dysfunction or an expectable response of the individual to the vicissitudes of her life.

Horwitz and Wakefield believe in the existence of truly disordered depressions and in the difference of the latter from other types of normal depressive states. For them, depression as a mental disorder is a completely different category from sadness, even when the latter is of devastating character. The difference, they argue, dwells not in any exclusive symptomatic pattern but, particularly, in the fact that disordered depression presents a picture of immobilizing suffering bewilderingly disengaged from actual life circumstances (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, p. 12). Symptoms themselves can be the same in both sadness and depression, and even its persistence in time, which renders the DSM criteria unable to offer a minimally precise basis for the establishment of a distinction between normal and pathological depression.

A clear and efficient method for understanding mental disorders is needed, they claim, since the conflation between sadness and depression is a conceptual mistake with consequences not only for psychiatry and patients, but for society (Wakefield 1992).

That's what Horwitz and Wakefield set out to do in the book: to recoup the medical truth about depression. Their method implies two main lines of reasoning. The first establishes that "...it is the absence of an appropriate context for symptoms that indicates a disorder", since in disordered depression "...the symptom's severity is grossly disproportionate to the sufferers circumstances" (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, p.14). Their second line of argumentation holds that pathological depression is at stake when the organism is unable to perform its biological function. "In sum, a mental disorder exists when the failure of a person's internal mechanisms to perform their functions as designed by nature impinges harmfully on the person's well being as defined by social values and meanings" (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, p. 17).

The authors' perspective seems to embrace an idea which is far from being new in the field (see Boorse 1975), while complementing it by the acknowledgement that values do interfere with what is deemed a disorder. What is maintained is the idea that the normal is the natural, so that if the natural design of the organism is secured, the individual will be free of disease.

Criticisms towards this perspective are numerous (see Cooper 2002; Lilienfeld & Marino, 1995). A common objection is that mental disorders are characterized by intrinsically fuzzy boundaries between normal and pathological, so that normality and abnormality are arrayed on a continuum (Lilienfeld 1995).

Horwitz and Wakefield's response is that a scientific concept of disorder should not necessarily set such precise boundaries. The authors themselves admit that the boundary between normality and disorder is often subject to ambiguities (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, p. 17). Among these ambiguities, they concede that disordered depression might arise as a 'normal reaction' to contextual conditions (which only afterwards becomes disengaged from the original circumstance and persist), which suggests the proximity between what they call normal and disordered depression.

In my opinion, one of the merits of Horwitz and Wakefield is to fly away from biological reductionism by asserting that disordered conditions do not necessarily imply the existence of physiological causes, or that there is always a brain problem. Yet, they claim, psychological or social factors can also lead to dysfunctions, as well as biological factors are probably involved not only in disordered depression but also in normal, but devastating sadness. Their argument is thus that distinctions between normal and pathological depression should, therefore, be sought beyond causal explanations. That is, recognizing the still unresolved status of depression's etiology, the authors claim that the normal-pathological distinction is not a question of what leads to depression, but a question of how the organism performs or fail to perform its natural function (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, p. 17).

Putting it in a way that articulates the failure of an internal (biological) mechanism and the importance of context to determine a disorder, the authors hold that if depression results from a context (loss of a job, difficult living conditions, etc) there is normal suffering. However, if it lasts longer than the contextual conditions within it occurred, it indicates that there are dysfunctions in loss response mechanisms (which are biological), and hence, we have a disorder. In other words, if in an improved environment, the problem persists, we are dealing with a truly disordered depression.

Horwitz and Wakefield even provide sensible advice for doctors, saying that in the presence of contextual triggers, physicians should embrace a "watchful waiting", avoiding immediate medication and the misunderstanding of normal suffering as depression (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, p. 223). This is, admittedly, a wise practical solution to those concerned with the concept of disorder as a way to avoid engulfing all

the problems posed by life in a over extensive concept of pathology. In this sense, it is certainly valuable.

But a more problematic aspect of Horwitz and Wakefield's conceptualization of disordered depression is the idea that social conditions sometimes used to understand the recent growth in depressive rates tend to explain merely normal sadness reactions and not mental disorders, which occur independently of any external factor. In their words: "Sociologists persistently fail to distinguish whether high scores on symptom scales stem from persons with chronic and recurrent conditions that fluctuate independently of social conditions or from those with transitory and situationally induced stress" (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, p. 205).

The authors argue that three processes drive people into distress: 1) low social status 2) loss of valued attachments 3) inability to reach important goals. These are normal causes for distress, they argue, and thus, justifiable motives for suffering and not pathological conditions (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, p. 219).

The definition of motives for normal distress implies that if the individual's contextual situation does not include at least one of the 3 elements that justify distress, their suffering is not situationally induced and thus, it's a pathological form of suffering. Concretely, we might think that a person with high social status, who hasn't recently experienced any loss of valued attachments or frustration about reaching 'important goals' should not feel depressed. If he feels depressed, it's because his organism is not performing well: he has disordered depression, a state that, according to the authors, fluctuates independently of social conditions.

To my mind, whereas the authors' argument that the dividing line between normality and disorder lies in the greater rigidity that depressive feelings acquire over time sounds reasonable and even valuable for clinical purposes, the idea that pathological depression is necessarily independent of the context is based on a very questionable and narrow definition of what is 'social'.

That is, when Horwitz and Wakefield claim that disordered depression fluctuates independently of social reasons, a number of theoretical issues seem to be left unanswered. To be very concise, the measurement of an improved environment or even the decision about the existence or inexistence of contextual triggers or social conditions clearly involves evaluative interpretations. Putting it in the form of a question: How to determine whether a social condition can induce distress and suffering or not? Or yet: Which factors are regarded as contextual triggers / social conditions for depression? Who

decides if the environment improved and the traumatic event ceased and on what basis it is done?

Horwitz and Wakefield's response to the latter question - based on the three fundamental reasons justifying distress - is, in my opinion, too narrow and clearly unfitted to address the rather difficult task of determining what constitutes a 'social cause'.

Furthermore, I agree with authors such as Brinkmann (2013) and Ehrenberg (2004) in their criticism of the essentializing opposition between nature and culture underlying Horwitz and Wakefield's definition of pathological mental states. The problem with this opposition is that it overlooks the fact that to set apart cultural and natural factors in human lives (Brinkmann 2013, p. 111) is impossible. Facts and values are necessarily intertwined as long as the human condition is concerned (Ehrenberg 2004, p. xvi).

## **2.4 - Is this the epidemic of depression or the epidemic of money?**

The rise in antidepressant treatment, particularly prescriptions for new generation antidepressants or selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) is frequently interpreted as a chief causal factor to the emergence of the so-called epidemic of depression.

Direct-to-consumer advertising and other phenomena involving different types of incentives that pharmacological companies offer to health practitioners so that they prescribe its compounds (Rosenthal et al. 2003, cited in Hansen 2005) are some of the elements underlying this kind of interpretation.

Concerning the statistics for antidepressants' rates of sale, medication such as Prozac, Paxil, Zoloft etc. are now among the largest selling prescription drugs of any sort. During the 1990s, spending for antidepressants increased by 600% in the USA, exceeding \$7 billion annually by the year 2000 (Horwitz 2002).

A recent article in the *New York Times* (Rabin 2013) reports that over the last two decades one in 10 Americans uses antidepressants, and that among women in their 40s and 50s, the figure is one in four. Such extensive use of antidepressants certainly suggests, as the article continues to argue, that depression is being misdiagnosed and antidepressants overly prescribed.

In Canada, between 1981 and 2000, total prescriptions for *all* antidepressants increased by 353% from 3 to 14.5 million (Currie 2005).

Analyzing the wholly complex interplays between psychopharmacology companies, researchers, universities and medications, David Healy in his book *Let them Eat Prozac* (2004b) claims that the phenomenon of the prevalence of depression in extraordinary and unwarranted scale is a reality fundamentally created by the antidepressants' history. After antidepressants, says Healy (2004b), depression transited from a hardly unrecognized condition to a real epidemic.

The numbers presented by Healy (2004b, p. 4) are striking. While before antidepressants, only about fifty to one hundred per million were thought to suffer from what was then melancholia, figures today reach the staggering number of one hundred thousand affected people per million, and this, despite the availability of treatments.

He also presents data (Healy 2004c, p. 8) which estimate that sales of antidepressants soared in the UK and the USA through the 1990s while sales of tranquillizers flattened. Since the volume of sales of psychotropic drugs for mental problems remains approximately constant, this indicates that what is involved, at least in part, is not a detection of new cases of depression but a transformation of anxiety disorders into cases of depression.

Still, when depression becomes corporatized, treatment is sold to everyone, including doctors and patients. In his essay *Good Science or Good Business?* (2004a), Healy calls attention to the pharmaceutical industry's highly developed skills for gathering and disseminating evidence in consonance to its business interests. Among the methods used towards this goal, he mentions the convening of what he terms as "consensus conferences", the sponsoring of symposia, and of patient groups to lobby for treatments. Over time, these strategies are able to produce significant changes in the mentality of clinicians and the public, who learn to recognize many other kinds of cases as depression (Healy 2004a, p. 75) and to incorporate the biopsychiatric interpretation of depression as the only possible explanation.

The psychiatrist Philippe Pignarre argues, similarly, that as with any other product, a market should be created for antidepressants. Psychopharmaceutical companies, he argues, have been successful in doing that by "recruiting depressives" for their medications, converting depression into a sort of fake epidemic (Pignarre 2001, cited in Petersen 2011, p. 20).

Japan is an interesting case. Before SSRIs were promoted by a pharmaceutical company in 1999, experiences such as melancholia and fragility were understood by Japanese people as part of life, not pathological conditions to be alleviated. However, after the company's education campaigns, wherein drug company representatives visited



doctors to promote the prescription of SSRIs for symptoms like “heavy head, stiff shoulders, sleep problems, backache, tiredness, laziness and poor appetite”, a new ‘disease’, *kokoro no kaze*, was established, and sales of SSRIs in Japan quintupled between 1998 and 2003 (Currie 2005, p. 11).

Obviously, this increase could be credited to the emergence of a welcoming awareness for a problem that, previously, used to be undiagnosed and under-treated. That’s exactly what the product manager for Paxil conveys: “People (in Japan) didn’t know they were suffering from a disease. We felt it was important to reach out to them. The message was that depression can be cured by medicine” (Currie 2005, p. 11).

What Paxil’s product manager seems to leave unfocused, however, is that Japanese people have been suffering severe pressure in work environments through managerial practices that reveal the country’s own assimilation of capitalist values, a situation that fuels depression and, in many cases, suicide. Besides, at school, wherein the system is extremely competitive, as Japanese authorities admit, episodes of violence (often leading to assassination) have become increasingly frequent. Finally, there is the alarming phenomenon of “Hikikomori”<sup>6</sup>, a Japanese term to refer to the experience of reclusive adolescents or young adults who drop out of school and voluntarily lock themselves in their rooms, refusing to go out even to have meals or to use the toilet. In conjunction, these social phenomena suggest that a biological interpretation of depression in Japanese societies (and the consequent adoption of the Western model for understanding it without further scrutiny) tend to be a gross, perhaps ideological, mistake. In this sense, it rings true that financial interests of pharmaceutical companies selling antidepressants have somehow ‘created’ depression as a medical malady in Japan.

Junko Kitanaka, in his book *Depression in Japan: Psychiatric Cures for a Society in Distress* (2012) analyzes the institutionalization of depression as a medical subject in Japan. Being depression historically envisaged in Japanese society as a phenomenon linked to overwork, the “Japanese-style of medicalization” does not deny the cultural argument. Rather, it actively incorporates this perspective setting forth a ‘marriage’ between biological and social causes that threatens to blur the distinction between the two (Kitanaka 2012).

Kitanaka remarks that even though the incorporation of the social in the etiological understanding of depression might sound as a triumph of the Japanese worker’s movement, in social practice, he explains, there seems to be an apparent tension between the way by which the social language of depression are being used by different

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<sup>6</sup> A documentary about the problem is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0RooegHMXFg>.

social actors. While workers and their supporters employ this social discourse as a way to vocalize collective discontents and fight for social transformation, the same discourse is also used by industry and the state as a way to quieting such sentiments (Kitanaka 2012, p. 10).

Thus, at the end of the day, even if the ‘overwork issue’ and other cultural factors are referred as part of depression’s equation, it’s medicine, and more particularly, antidepressants that should address the problem.

In sum, depression seems, indeed, to be entangled in an increasingly powerful web of economic interests, which implies that any analysis of the startling dimension of its rates in contemporary times must acknowledge the existence of depression as a profitable commodity.

## **2.5 - The drug is what tells the diagnostic**

The so-called “drug cartography” (Radden 2003, p. 38) is another factor interfering with the expansion of depression throughout contemporary Western societies.

The term stands for an emerging phenomenon: before the persistent and convoluted etiological difficulties inherent to mental problems, psychiatric categories are remapped based on psychopharmacological effects.

In other words, the current research in psychopharmacology is leading biological psychiatrists to assert a causal model for psychiatric classification. Through the lens of this new “drug taxonomy” (Kramer 1993) depression is no longer determined by a specific set of symptoms, but it is to be seen as every condition alleviated by antidepressants.

That is, if a certain substance alleviates different mental conditions, one should conclude that each of these conditions has a common underlying cause. Hence, even in cases where their signs and symptoms are different, they are to be seen either as similar or as the very same condition under different guises (Hansen 2003).

For example, Luhmann (2000, p.49) remarks that if a supposed manic-depressive does respond to lithium or another mood stabilizer, a psychiatrist will wonder whether after all he is a schizophrenic.

Discussing this issue, Radden (2003) notes that, at a first glance, such an approach might overcome controversies on whether to equate conditions manifested in different cultures through different clusters of symptoms, as the same pathological condition or not. That is, discussions on whether Chinese and African depression, fundamentally

characterized by somatic symptoms should be equated with Western depression, would find a direct answer through drug cartography's perspective. If each of these different symptom clusters were effectively treated through antidepressants, they should receive the same diagnosis: depression.

Through 'listening to the drug' (Kramer 1993) in clinical practice, diagnoses proliferate under the logic of the drug, undermining both psychopathological and descriptive concerns. Hence, if representative samples of patients who do not necessarily meet the current clinical criteria of depression, nonetheless respond well to fluoxetine, then we may need to reconsider our criteria of depression. Kramer calls this "... diagnostic bracket creep, the expansion of categories to match the scope of relevant medications" (1993, p. 15).

The 'drug cartography' has, however, obvious shortcomings. Since responses to the same drug may differ in two patients with the same condition and may be the same in two patients with different medical conditions (Zachar 2000), drugs and its effects cannot provide a safe ground for resolving diagnostic issues.

Notwithstanding the problems, 'drug cartography' has been gaining strength. On the domain of depression, given the fact that antidepressants can also alleviate a varied set of different pathologies, the "drug cartography" rationale implies that these disturbances hide an underlying depression. As a result, many other conditions are annexed to depression, such as anxiety, bulimia, cancerous, gastric and neck pain, alcoholism, constipation, hair loss and others, inflating the rates of depression.

## **2.6 - Depression as a discursive reality**

Another approach to the problem of the alleged 'era of depression' is defended by social constructivist perspectives.

Pérez-Álvarez, Saas and García-Montes (2008) draw on this perspective to claim that psychiatric and clinical expectations and diagnostic trends do influence the presentation of symptoms and the nature of disorders. In the case of depression, people would acquire, from the cultural idioms that pervade their social environment, especially those derived from the psychiatric framework, specific codes to articulate certain experiential conflicts and other life's vicissitudes as 'depression'. As a result, the era of epidemic depression flourishes in connection to the "dominant cultural model" for mental illnesses (Pérez- Álvarez Saas & García-Montes 2008, p. 216).

Ehrenberg (2010b) opposes the idea of mental illnesses as a discursive reality – that marks the claims of some social constructionist approaches - arguing that individuals do not live under a description and that conceiving mental illnesses this way would have the epistemological consequence of reducing a psychopathological fact to a by-product of the activity of mental health professionals and other social factors.

The authors' point is that the so-called era of depression is, ultimately, consequence of a cultural process in which people learn to frame certain conflicts and painful vicissitudes of life (which in the past would be articulated in religious or moral terms) in terms of a mental pathology amenable to medical treatment, labeling it as 'depression' (Pérez- Álvarez Saas & García-Montes, p. 215). It is not, therefore, that people nowadays call "depression" a suffering that have always been there but unnamed. Rather, through the very act of labeling certain conflicts and difficulties of life as depression - which implies agreeing about its definition, fundamental signs, symptoms, prognosis and therapeutics - depression has been socially constructed. As a result, people tend to experience as depression (in its socially instituted ways and forms) what they would otherwise experience differently.

The idea that discourse determines both the presentation of symptoms and the very nature of mental disorders is what, in a nutshell, Pérez- Álvarez Saas & García-Montes (2008) are arguing.

The issue of the medicalization and the pathologisation of life's problems is, I think, one of the important questions that arguments about the linguistic construction of mental disorders in general and depression in particular, may possibly help to address.

Indeed, there is a large and increasingly widespread tendency in Western contemporary societies to construe as a mental disorder (amenable to medical treatment) what otherwise would be experienced as problems in living (rooted in contextual determinants to be addressed) or as no problem at all. "And because patients (like clinicians) are targets of marketing by the pharmaceutical industry, they may end up having the disorders that the drugs treat" (Pérez- Álvarez Saas & García-Montes, 2008, p. 219)

This does not mean, however – the authors explicitly concede - to deny the reality of pathology and suffering. Pérez- Álvarez, Saas and García-Montes (2008) seem to have this question in mind. The authors argue that the question is not really to exclude psychological, physiological and societal questions, but to determine how much of the domain of mental disorder can be understood as being produced by linguistic practices

associated with medical / psychological expectations and diagnostic trends (2008, p. 213)..

I think this is a reasonable way of putting the issue. That is, on the one hand, mental pathologies, as depression, are produced by the dominant linguistic representations of the problems of life (as mental disorders with a certain course, symptomatology and prognostic). On the other, depression is also a phenomenon rooted in the biological and psychological levels of human experience which exist within a broader context of specific sociocultural practices.

## **2.7 - In few words... how 'depression epidemics' is to be understood?**

The study acknowledges the determinant role of all the previously analyzed factors to the construction of depression as a contemporary epidemic. That is, the epidemic of depression in contemporary times should be critically analyzed and even questioned as an objective reality. As Borch-Jacobsen (2002) argue, since there is no such a thing like a virus causing depression, the question persists: why its few cases in the 1950s have expanded into the millions of cases in the 1990s? In search for understanding, the facile interpretation of the problem as a natural, objective and always existing biological phenomenon which now becomes visible thanks to scientific advancements is unconvincing. First, and considering the pathologisation of life problems (which includes the marketing of depression as an undiagnosed and expanding reality), the idea of a contemporary epidemic of depression as a biological phenomenon sounds barely ideological. Second, the admittedly concrete experience of anguish, inhibition, meaninglessness that plagues large numbers of people in contemporary times cannot be envisaged as an always existing, unchangeable phenomenon for the simple fact that human life is as biological as it is historical and social. Saying that means to acknowledge, in consistence to the social constructionist argument, that a lot of individual's experiences of suffering, crises and conflicts have been framed as 'depression' because the pharmacological, medical and social discourses propagate the view of this clinical entity as an objective reality (Borch-Jacobsen 2002).

Kehl (2009a, p. 212) referring to her clinical experience with depressed patients points out that when the signifier of depression is generalized, becoming synonymous to existential suffering, the neurotic will tend to identify with its symptoms in search for an identity and a legitimated place within the discourse of medicine and psychiatry.

However, the thesis' argument is that even though the 'epidemic of depression' is, to a large extent, a discursive construction, the fact that increased numbers of individuals have been fitting into this "model of being ill" is to be considered. That is, beyond discourse – that characterizes depression as a cognitive, emotional and physical dysfunction whose solution must be technical – or, along with the discursive creation of depression, depressive feelings and behavior (and depression's inflated rates) also refer to the phenomenological experience of individuals as they live life in the world– in its biological, psychological, historical and social levels.

In other words, because mental disorders in contemporary times are, to a large extent, the social construction of the vicissitudes of life as psychological or psychiatric problems, one should not rule out the existence of mental disorders as a psychopathological fact. Hence, the large rates of depression in contemporary times, I am arguing, not only reveal discursive practices in which certain vicissitudes of life congeal into the cultural idiom of depression, but it also refers to individuals' concrete existences (within the time and space where they live). The thesis is an effort to illuminate some of these issues, on the sociocultural level of analysis.

The concreteness and empirical reality of depression in the contemporary western world is suggested by one of the most grave and fatal consequences of depression: suicide. Even though suicide rates cannot, in any case, be seen as corresponding or even indicating the social prevalence of depressive states, it's very probable that a significant number of suicides may somehow be associated with depression. *The World Health Organization* (2012) estimates that even though suicide is complex, with psychological, social, biological, cultural and environmental factors involved, mental disorders (particularly depression and alcohol use disorders) are a major risk factor for suicide in Europe and North America.

In the same report, we find the alarming statistics that, on a global scale, suicide cases suffered a 60% increase in the last 45 years, which means that for each forty seconds, one person voluntarily causes her own death. Regarding the distribution of suicide prevalence in different social groups, although traditionally suicide rates have been highest among the male elderly, the rates among young people have been increasing to such an extent that they are now the group at highest risk in a third of countries, in both developed and developing countries. The report remarks, yet, that these already alarming figures could be even greater if it included suicide attempts, which are up to 20 times more frequent than completed suicide.

The growth in suicide rates is an undeniable, visible and dark signal of our contemporary hardships. And while the large rates of depression can be interpreted as a mere shadow of factors which are external to it as a psychopathological reality, suicide suggests (without proving) that depression crescent presence in contemporary societies is also a concrete reality.

We argue thus that the phenomenon of “depression epidemic’ would be better understood if it is addressed as a complex effect generated by the association of many forces alien to the reality of depression as a mental disturbance *and* a psychopathological phenomenon pregnant with the current *modus vivendi* of contemporary civilizations.

## **Chapter 3: Understanding and explaining depression as pathology of meaninglessness in contemporary times: epistemological reflections**

### **3.1 - Are we living in a new epoch? Terminological decisions and its underpinnings**

The issue of whether the present era should be seen as a complete distinct epoch than modernity or as a radicalization of modern patterns is marked by disagreement.

The variety of terms to refer to the present epoch clearly expresses the lack of consensus around this issue. Some authors envisage these transformations as constituting a new, postmodern era (Baudrillard 1994; Harvey 1990; Jameson 1991; Lyotard 1984), in a consideration of the present epoch as a moment that follows, and is in reference to, modernity. Other scholars adopt expressions such as “third modernity” (Carleheden 2001; Wagner 1994) “high modernity”, “late modernity”, “reflexive modernity”, “liquid modernity” etc. (Bauman 2004; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991) to describe the period, emphasizing a relation of continuity between the present moment and the modern era. There is still a whole variety of other terms to designate the current period, such as postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, multinational capitalism and so on. Another common designation appears under the more encompassing rubric of ‘contemporary epoch’, which does not focus on the discussion about whether we have entered or not in a new era, the postmodernity.

An interesting claim in defense of the permanence of Modernity (although in a deeply transformed form) is proposed by Kaya (2004). He argues that if Modernity is characterized by inherent tensions and openness, transformations are an expectable part of the modern process and thus, it's not necessary to work outside Modernity to acknowledge and understand these (admittedly radical) shifts. In contrast, he claims, conceptions that embrace a partial view of modernity as an epoch fully based on rationality whilst modern pluralism is rendered invisible, tend to interpret the radical pluralism that comes to mark contemporary ideas and practices as an indication that a new era has begun (Kaya 2004, p. 47).

Indeed, Modernity had, from the very beginning, the seeds of today's ‘empire of doubt’ planted on its own soil. Thus, the increasing skepticism towards the totalizing nature of metanarratives (Lyotard 1984) - which influences many other postmodernist perspectives - seems more an expectable fate than a drastic rupture.

The conceptual polarization among postmodernist and modernist thinkers has been losing strength. Lately, even those scholars who use the term ‘postmodernity’



usually don't take it literally - as a complete superation of modernity - but as a way to illuminate the significance of the transformations which have been impacting our lives and societies from around the middle of the last century.

Dufour (2008), for instance, recognizes postmodernity as a time marked by a historical mutation in which modernity's collective narratives of foundation and legitimization are left behind – in this sense a drastic rupture, “ ... a crack in modernity” as he puts it (2008, p. 15) – whilst acknowledging the permanence of “...vast zones that are [still] modern or even premodern” (2008, p. 12).

Beyond discussions on the internal coherence and doubts about the validity of the term 'postmodernity', what makes the “modernity/postmodernity” debate relevant is, in my opinion, neither the discussion about the best term to label the period, nor the conceptual decision about whether or not recent transformations warrant the analytical demarcation of a new era. Given the fact that, generally speaking, both modern and postmodern approaches tend to acknowledge that multiple and even hybrid modern and contemporary elements seem to be present in both periods - even though the so-called postmodernist thinkers sometimes seem to exaggerate the novelties and to downplay continuities (Kellner 1992) - the debate's relevance lies, mainly, in their specific and often complementary contributions to the wider discussion and deeper understanding of the different aspects of the contemporary condition.

This mindset becomes manifest in our selection of the term 'contemporary civilizations' which is the privileged way by which the present epoch is designated in this study. By selecting neither 'modernity' nor 'post-modernity' two main implications follow.

On the one hand, we leave open (or unfocused) the discussion of whether or not we are living in a radically new historical moment, investing instead on the understanding of the complex and often contradictory nature of these changes. On the other hand, the term 'contemporary Western civilizations' implies that the transformations recently lived in the West are significant and deep enough to justify the replacement of the term 'modernity'.

Thereby, the thesis envisages 'Western contemporary civilizations' as a term that points to a cluster of shifts, some of which are pathogenic, emergent pathological tendencies which have been fueling 'crises of meaninglessness' throughout the social body, calling forth the broadening presence of depression.

In his *Postmodernism, or the Cultural logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) Jameson interprets the pathogenic traits of contemporary times as the symptomatology of

postmodernism. Postmodernism, in Jameson's accounts, designates the cultural form inherent to the logic of late capitalism, which works at the level of culture and subjectivity.

Among the consequences of postmodernism for subjectivity, Jameson analyzes the production of a new model of subjective formation – a 'schizophrenic subject' living by a " ... series of pure and unrelated presents in time" (1991, p. 35) - able to adjust and flow in a peculiar socioeconomic world (1991, p. xv). The schizophrenic subject exists in a cultural order marked by a series of traits, such as: the weakening of historicity, wherein the historical past turns into emptied, commoditized stylizations ('pastiche') to be consumed; a new depthlessness / superficiality, which finds expression both in contemporary theory (*vis a vis* the postmodern rejection of the idea of 'truth' beyond the surface of ideology) and in the whole culture of image, wherein there is no transcendental meaning standing behind image (Jameson 1991), among others.

Jameson's symptomatology of postmodernism as a function of the epoch's reliance on "the cultural logic of capitalism" wherein multiple spheres of life become pervaded by intense commodification is consistent with the thesis' general theoretical framework. However, the analysis of the pathogenic features of contemporary civilizations to be developed in the following chapters are more directly informed – as noted in the introduction - by Georg Simmel's and Émile Durkheim's accounts on the modern epoch in dialogue with the more contemporary ideas of the French philosopher Dany-Robert Dufour.

Now, some of Jameson's ideas are very much in line – at least in its general tone of themes and concerns - with Dufour's perspective on postmodernity as the decline of transcendental values in a societal context dominated by unfettered capitalism.

Both Dufour and Jameson detect the waning of criticism (which characterized modernism and the modern subject) and its replacement by a postmodernist cultural order in sync with the logic of consumer capitalism. For instance, similarly to Jameson, Dufour (2008, 2009, 2013) illuminates the pathogenic impacts brought about by "... the gradual ascendancy of commodities – to the detriment of all other considerations – ..." (2008, p. 15) both to culture (leading to desymbolization and thus cultural impoverishment) and to individuality. Concerning the latter, Dufour claims that postmodernity's emergent subject-form combines with the capital's demand for malleable, flexible individuals, continuously sensitive to new fashions and available for subtle forms of social control; a precarious, acritical individual displaying psychotic tendencies "... open to all kinds of fluctuating identities and who is therefore ready to be plugged into every commodity" (Dufour

2008, p. 12). The idea is, of course, not far from Jameson's depiction of the postmodern 'schizophrenic subject', whose ability to adjust to the flow of commodities aids, according to Jameson (1991), the replication and reinforcement of the capitalist logic.

These themes - re-elaborated and re-interpreted in the thesis – will be instrumental for the elaboration of our own diagnostic of the pathogenic effects of contemporary times marked by intense financialization of culture.

### **3.2 – Doing research after postmodernism: epistemological decisions**

These days, epistemological decisions of a contemporary researcher working in the field of social sciences are necessarily affected by the fact that the belief on universal standards of truth became, in contemporary times, weary and contested.

In this regard, postmodernism is at the center of the controversies. In its consequence for research methods, postmodernist perspectives can to a certain extent be considered a methodological critique of conventional quantitative and qualitative social science. Now, this may render research a radically skeptical, merely deconstructive venture or, in its more affirmative consequences, it may inspire a non-naïve, and more honest attitude regarding claims on 'truth validation' and 'the purity of knowledge'.

However, due to the proclamation of a dichotomic opposition between reason and contingency that impregnates some of the themes raised under the banner of postmodernism, rationality risks being conceived as mere rhetoric. This can foster radical skepticism which, in turn, may function as a rhetorical thinking itself, undoing critique and social practices that oppose the consensual idea of the 'end of history' (Duayer & Moraes 1997, p. 28)<sup>7</sup>.

In sum, epistemological caution, refining "...our sensitivity to differences and reinforcing our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (Lyotard 1984, cited in Kellner 1992) sounds very reasonable. However, the process through which sensitivity for epistemological complexity shifts into cynicism, political immobilization, the collapse of critique, of theory and the effacement of any sense of shared humanity beyond individualized discourse is, I think, to be analyzed in its historical roots and challenged.

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<sup>7</sup> The argument that contemporary culture has reached "the end of history" refers, in the work of American critic Francis Fukuyama (1992), to the idea that history had ended or "vanished" with the spread of globalization and the achievement of modern aspirations of freedom and justice; In some postmodernist accounts, as for instance in Jean Baudrillard's (1994) work, this end should be understood as the collapse of the very *idea* of historical progress and the disappearance of all utopic visions for both the political Right and the Left .

The alternative might be, therefore, to espouse a less extreme consideration of knowledge neither as the mirror of truth, nor as a mere narrative, but instead as perspective, illumination and the search for credible theories about reality (Alvesson 2002).

As Alvesson (2002, p. 15) notes, truth claims are problematic; yet, the understanding of social issues should be pursued beyond, on the one hand, any totalizing attempt to capture all facets of life in a photographic-like manner through a monolithic vocabulary and, on the other, the radical negation of theory in favour of mere ‘discourse seduction’ and pragmatic consensus.

Further, if doubting the existence of claims to truth outside ideology or textuality may defeat dangerous desires for totality (in both epistemological and political levels) it may also – in its most radical forms - fit right into the hands of capitalism.

This ambiguity is well captured by Terry Eagleton: “Its nervousness of such concepts as truth has alarmed the bishops and charmed the business executives, just as its compulsions to place words like ‘reality’ in scare quotes unsettles the pious Burger in the bosom of his family but is music to his ears in his advertising agency” (1996, p. 28).

The conclusion to be drawn from the above reflections is that neither a full/uncritical agreement nor an outright rejection of postmodernist ideas seems to be the best epistemological approach.

Besides, all critical considerations about postmodernism do not entail, in my analysis, neither a nostalgic reaction of the “will to order” (Featherstone 1988, p. 204), nor it is a sign of filiation to the ‘Marxist utopia’. Rather, it implies the more integrating view that the postmodernist intellectual orientation has, in its consequences to sociology, both strengths and weaknesses.

### **3.3 - Reflections on understanding and explaining depression in the ‘age of the brain’**

Notwithstanding the decline of positivist methodologies in certain circles of scholarly research and the linked rising of the ‘postmodern agenda’ (Wood 1999), the epistemological scenario of human and social sciences is endowed with contradictory aspects.

In a recent article entitled *The Human Sciences in a Biological Age* (2012) Nikolas Rose claims that popular science’s speculations on the supposed capacity to understand

and manipulate everything from our cognitive abilities to aging and death constitute “a dream of control” (Rose 2012, p. 4).

As analyzed in the first chapter, in the area of mental illness research, neuroscientific knowledge is at the center of discussions. In some of its strands, the task to understand the mind and virtually all social issues is seen as ultimately dependent on developments of experimental knowledge about the brain.

Yet, the so-called medical naturalism that underpins the Kraepelinian shape of contemporary psychiatric nosology, assumes the existence of a real world of natural disease entities which can be accurately described (Pilgrim & Bentall 1999).

There is nothing more dissonant to the pos-modernist intellectual mindset that we have briefly discussed above, than these so-called ‘dreams of control’ - which are, in fact, continuously threatened by unresolved downsides and disappointments, especially in the mental health domain (Rose 2012).

Expressing the influence of the postmodernist intellectual orientation in the field of social sciences, Rose (2012) notes, sociological common sense has long been associating the definition of human life as ultimately biological (and amenable to control and prediction) “... with essentialism, determinism, reductionism, fatalism; with the naturalisation of human delinquencies from sexism to warfare; and with a bloody legacy of horrors from racial science to eugenics” (Rose 2012, p.1).

However, these two opposite trends share space in the Human Sciences within the ‘biological age’. Rose goes as far as to claim that ‘constructivism’ is already *passé* whilst, currently, the rhetoric of materiality is almost obligatory (2012, p. 2).

This opposition could be analyzed in several levels, including questioning, as Nikolas Rose does, if the social science’s “negation of biology”- based on its dread of determinism, reductionism, and on the recognition of the ethical and socio-political consequences of locating humans among the animals - should not be balanced by a more positive consideration to the new ways of understanding the dynamic relations between ‘the vital’ and its milieu, without losing its critical grip (Rose 2012, p. 16).

But the point I want to highlight here refers not to the problematic of opposition but, instead, to the problematic of resemblance. I am referring to the paradoxical fact that the polarization of some of the ferocious critics of positivism may, in some aspects, evoke the same partial view of understanding wherein (even though implicitly) only the empirical domain of life is sustained.

This critique is pivotal in the works of authors such as Roy Bhaskar and György Lukács (Duayer 2006) who argue that the impugnation of ontological ideas that marks

both positivist and constructionist approaches, is paralleled by an implicit ontology rooted in the empirical domain of reality.

Duayer (2006, p. 124), drawing on Bhaskar's ideas, argues that by refusing to think about the world as it is, empirical realism – a term used by Bhaskar to refer to an ontology of Humean inspiration which underlies both classical empiricism, logical positivism and, negatively, more 'skeptical strands' which oppose the latter - ends up limiting the understanding of the world to its immediacy and practical worth. Thus, behind the supposed neutrality of the radical anti-ontology of both positivism and the 'postmodern agenda', there is an occult ontology, in which the world is collapsed into experience and sensations.

From the side of postmodernism, the view that there's no conceivable reality outside of language potentially feeds the idea that the privileged aim of knowledge and perhaps the sole criteria to assess its worth and accuracy is utility – a notion especially important in Richard Rorty's neopragmatism<sup>8</sup>.

Now, utility is clearly a term which fits nicely with claims of 'truth collapse', but also with neuroscience's 'dreams of control'.

On the one hand, social constructionists' approaches to medical knowledge challenge the presentation of disease as 'natural' by medicine, as well as the neutral character of the scientific enterprise and of rationality in medical thought and practice. Medical definitions are, from this perspective, founded not on reason but on a complex web of social relations in a particular point of time. Still, scientific development is seen as being rooted not in progress, but in shifting power struggles (Bury 1986). As a result, and since rationality is not to be conceived as something external to social relations, scientific accounts can only be adjudicated through its usefulness in a particular context.

On the other hand, in the domain of mental health research, the 'essentialist' views of some of the reductionist versions of biopsychiatry and neurosciences tend to empty all the historical, culturally-based, psychological, moral meanings of mental illnesses to the sake of allegedly objective and 'useful' truths of the brain.

Beyond the domain of epistemological and ontological discussions, the prevalence of practice and utility over theory, according to György Lukács, is a problem rooted in the broader structures of society. For him, the need to regulate all dimensions of social life

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty (1997) argues that epistemological concerns should be replaced by pragmatic concerns with practices for coping with the world. His ideas, therefore, although sharing with other postmodernist a skeptical orientation based on a kind of 'anti-epistemology' and 'anti-philosophy', differ from some postmodernist accounts which hold a deconstructionist focus without supporting any claims about the "utility of knowledge" (Cruikshank 2001).

according to the logics of capital represents some of the central structures of contemporary times, expressed into a philosophy of science circumscribed to the manipulation of practical life (Duayer 2003, p. 16).

In sum, the crises and controversies in epistemology reflected in the philosophical debates surrounding the question of ‘postmodernism’ have meant that in a very important sense, the terrain of knowledge has been ceded to a resurgent positivism, empiricism, reductive biologism. The latter, by promising to dispense with such obscure and difficult philosophical questions of the nature of reality and the conditions of possibility of knowledge concerning reality, has filled the theoretical vacuum. As a result, questions of understanding and explaining reality have very often been ‘stolen’ away from the humanities and social sciences, whilst authority on such questions turns to the secure hands of scientists, doctors, pharmaceutical companies and Pharma-psychiatrists.

The aim and challenge of this study is to examine the issue of the increased rates of depression outside the logic of usefulness - and linked deflation of the critical worth of theory – which often marks both ‘postmodern approaches’ and ‘medical objectivism’.

## Chapter 4: Reflections on the meaning of ‘meaning’, meaningless and meaningful lives

This chapter aims to specify how the terms ‘meaning’, ‘meaninglessness’ and ‘meaningfulness’ are understood, delineating within this complex field the particular theoretical perspective of the thesis, aligned to the sociological motivations of this study.

Unlike animals, human beings do not live their lives by merely following what their instincts impel them to do. Although instinct plays its part, as conscious beings, men and women can behave in manners that contradict basic instinctual laws - at its limits, in suicide.

Human life is not resolved by and upon natural impulses. Men and women irremediably have to decide what to do with themselves and with life and the answer for this is in no way immediately given by nature. They have to find answers elsewhere.

For while non-human animals and plants simply persist through time, determined by the demands of survival and reproduction, human beings *lead* their lives in the world (Mulhall 2005, p.15).

It is human beings alone who operate in their everyday lives with an understanding of Being (although implicit and imprecise). As Martin Heidegger puts it, “Dasein is ontically distinguished by the fact, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it” (Heidegger 1962, cited in Wheeler 2013).

Humans are therefore ‘dual beings’. On the one hand, they have a symbolic identity responsible for the search for understanding and morality which place them out of nature - or beyond mere instinct. On the other, immanent death is permanently bringing them back to their natural inherence (Becker 1973, p. 26).

Having this peculiar symbolic ability which impels them to question the unknown of their origin and fate, humans are marked by a quite ineluctable impulse and need to signify existence: “Why am I here? What is it all for?”. Or as Durkheim formulates it: “We cannot live without representing to ourselves the world around us” (2005, p. 38). Indeed, we cannot avoid, as human beings marked by the duality of nature and symbolic identity, to search for narratives about the experiences we live and the objects we come across. These narratives, in turn, are formed through the symbolic interactions we establish with the group, constituting a certain culture. Culture is, in this sense, the shared and accumulated transcendence of Nature, or a means to live life beyond instincts.

In a classical sociological interpretation of the ontological duality of individuals, Émile Durkheim (2005) critically asserts that the old “Homo duplex” idea



was correctly identified but left unexplained by philosophers from Plato to Kant. The fundamental key to account for human duality, he claims, would only be found if one refuses to merely accept it as a feature of the given nature of man / reality. Alternatively, a scientific understanding of the genesis of this antinomy is needed. In a rationalistic manner, Durkheim claims that just as we now know that our bodily organism is a product of a genesis, our dual constitution cannot remain a sort of metaphysical mystery without verifiable causes. That's what he sets out to examine.

Durkheim points out that human beings have always had a strong intuition of their dual nature. For instance, duality underpins the division established by distinct religious cosmologies at all times between, on one side, the body (forming an integral part of the material universe) and on the other, the soul (whose homeland lies elsewhere in the world of sacred things) (Durkheim 2005).

Durkheim (2005) adds that this opposition is represented by any ordinary person in a way that, if not identical, is at least comparable to the way believers do. He is referring to the fact that our human psychic functions are generally ranked within a hierarchy in which at the bottom lie the functions dependent on our bodies, while the function connected to our symbolic capacities (thinking and morality) are somehow conceived as a superior function, inspiring analogous feelings as those of the believer before the sacred.

From this observation – making here a long story short – Durkheim argues that the duality of our nature is “... only a particular case of the division of things into the sacred and profane that is found at the basis of all religions” (2005, p. 42). This division, in turn, corresponds to the universal human need of separating individual things from those things which, going beyond the individual, cannot be touched or contested, providing individual life with structure, constraints and yet, elevating and vivifying the existence in ways that we are incapable of realizing when reduced to our own forces (Durkheim 1976, p. 209).

In sum, the ‘dual character’ of human beings is, for Durkheim, a function of human beings social rootedness. That is, through participation in the social group, a “collective conscience” emerges (formed by symbolic contents such as ideas, beliefs, moral principles etc.). Being internalized by each individual, these symbolic contents are felt as part of their ‘second nature’, something other and greater than oneself (Durkheim 1976) and totally distinct (in its role and worth) from corporal, ordinary functions.

And this is central, according to Durkheim, in terms of meaning constitution. For if nature, as we claimed above, does not in itself answer human beings’ questions about

existence, society – manifested in the symbolic side of individuals - is the creative accomplishment of life, or to better define it according to Durkheim, the basic, mandatory necessity of humanity without which life could not be endowed with meaning. In other words, in a Durkheimian interpretation, meaning is fundamentally dependent on things beyond the individual in his isolation, things that we have in common with other humans, which simultaneously constrains and uplifts human lives. In fact, the very constitution of individual is at stake. In his words:

Left to himself the individual would become dependent upon physical forces. If he has been able to escape, to free himself, to develop a personality it is because he has been able to shelter under a *sui generis* force; an intense force since it results from the coalition of all the individual forces, but an intelligent and moral force capable, consequently, of neutralizing the blind and amoral forces of nature. This is the collective force (1974, p. 55).

The symbolic, or in Durkheim's terms, the social counterpart of human beings is essentially rooted in language. If "... a man could not enter into relations with nature without taking account of its immensity, of its infiniteness...", ideas and concepts that may "substitute the obscure sensation" that human beings had of natural forces are "impossible without the word" (Durkheim 1976, pp. 73, 74). Now, it is unquestionable that language, and the system of concepts which it translates, is the product of collective representations (1976, p. 434), being thus beyond the sphere of the monadic individual. Thereby, inasmuch as there is any possibility to represent the world (and thus to render it meaningful) unless through language, meaning is essentially rooted into the reality of collective life.

The collective narratives/representations that compose culture, however, whilst helping to ordinate issues of meaning, do not provide absolute rest and fullness. Through the fissures of cultural answers, meaninglessness lurks.

Anthropologically speaking, individuals constantly realize – not painlessly - that the continuous quest towards overcoming senselessness is not without its downfalls and doubts about the meaning of existence are expectable destinies of its somewhat precarious equilibrium.

But if humans have a psychological vulnerability to crises of meaning, sociologically, problems of meaning are in any way a modern phenomenon. As it is clear from the very beginning of recorded history, humanity has lived through some

troublesome periods wherein meaningfulness decreases and experiences of meaninglessness pervade the social scene.

In his book *The Open Society and its Enemies* (2002), Karl Popper elaborates on the theme. In a nutshell, Popper claims that under conditions of political instability and insecurity, a fundamental impulse of recovering a sense of totality arises. Thus, this search for totality (and we might add, this yearning for meaning) is not in any way an originally modern experience; contrarily, it is found at least since the philosophical impulses of Plato or earlier, Heraclitus (both of whom attempted to tackle the problem of an “unsettled social scene” by positing a law of historical development). More recently, Popper identifies “the spell of Plato” in the modern philosophical formulations of Hegel and Marx which, among others, attempted to bring historical change under some sort of totalizing rational control and large-scale planning (Popper 2002, p. 484).

Hence, to interpret, as I intend to do here, ‘crises of meaning/meaninglessness’ as a social malady of contemporary times, may be philosophically seen as either an oversimplification, or sociologically, as giving a mistaken accent to an old human burden.

This caveat is in part warranted. Human beings are ‘always-in-search-for-meaning’ creatures and thus irremediably vulnerable to doubts or, metaphorically, to ‘existential stumbles’ on the darkness of signification when threading in the inexact grounds of life purpose. As the Romanian playwright Eugène Ionesco puts it: “No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for the absolute. It is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa” (Ionesco 1964, p. 91).

That’s not by chance, therefore, that some depressives, from the pinnacle of their doubts about existence, often grasp a meaningful link between their experiences and the intrinsic human sentiment of abandonment and anguish.

As the philosopher Robert C. Solomon claims, depression can be in some of its aspects, “...our most courageous attempt to open ourselves up to the most gnawing doubts about ourselves and our lives (...) In depression, we (literally) “press ourselves down,” force on ourselves the burdens of universal doubt, the Cartesian method on a visceral level” (1977, p. 295).

Indeed, and beyond any caricatured pessimism about the absurdity of existence, the inherently (but latent) human anguish in regard to the meaning of life is timeless, pervasive and irremediable (in its limits).

In the scope of sociological analysis – as we are going to elaborate in the following lines – there is any final, complete answer to the issue of meaning which is not

permanently available to doubts and change. However, even though the ignorance about the definitive meaning of existence is a burden for all human beings so that either a kind of personal ‘symbolic paralysis’ or (usually linked) cultural periods of collective meaning crisis can be seen as expectable ‘accidents’, there are possible outlets to meaning in life.

The anthropological impulse to understand and signify life through the creation (or encounter of) forms such as thinking, art, religion, philosophy, science, sociability, values and ideals reveal the collective ways humanity found in order to overcome, or at least to handle this precariousness.

Georg Simmel’s accounts in his *The Conflict in Modern Culture* (1971b) are paradigmatic on this respect. Simmel interest is not to discuss how the ‘meaning of life’ is to be understood in a general way but to analyze how what he designates as “the free flow of life” needs to conform into specific objective formations, expressing and realizing itself by incarnating into laws, works of art, religions, science, traditions, etc. (Simmel 1971b, p. 375). These formations, according to Simmel, by providing provisory rests or incarnations for the intense, inherently formless and creative dynamism of life, deliver structures of meaning which endow life with form, order and content.

The search for meaningfulness is thus, simultaneously, a continuous striving, something that, as life itself, “... streams on without interruption” (Simmel 1971b, p. 376), and it is also embodied into cultural synthesis. In Simmel’s words, “Life is inseparably charged with contradiction. It can enter reality only in the form of its antithesis, that is, only in the form of form” (1971b, p. 392).

Historically, in the West, many collective formulations of the answer for the quest for meaning were attempted through forms such as Judeo-Christian traditions of belief, Platonic Idealism, Transcendental Idealism, Romanticism, the different forms of Utopia, or more recently, in a Nietzschean fashion, in the sheer affirmation of life premised upon the absence of metaphysical meanings. In the societal life, these ideas incarnate into ‘sacred entities / forms’ such as God, Nature, Society, The Father Land, History and so on, which served, at least for a while, to guide humanity. I will return to this discussion later.

For now, I want to keep with the idea that the awareness of death as a limit of life leads human beings to a continuous search for significance to their trajectories.

In Simmel’s *The View of Life* (2010) - which he wrote while he was struggling against cancer, considering it to be his ‘testament’ – the author presents the account of death as constitutive of life. This entails a conception of death, similarly to Heidegger’s notion of Being-towards-the-end (2010, p. 293), wherein finitude is not seen as an

external, independent sever of the thread of life. Rather, death is inherently conjoined to life, shaping its entire course towards the need of transcendence.

Life gets its form – cultural forms such as those previously referred, in art, religion, philosophy, traditions and so on – first of all from its antithesis, death. In other words, it is for the fact that it ends, that life strives towards transcending itself through the forms, ends, in a word, meaning.

It is therefore the limit, the temporal boundary of life that impels humans to overcome life as mere (chaotic) flux, motivating direction and meaning. In his words: “Death limits, that is, it gives form to life, not just in the hour of death, but also in continuing coloring all of life’s contents” (Simmel 2007, p. 74).

But the idea of limit (in this case death) as the existential impulse for endowing transitory life with meaning also applies, in Simmel’s accounts, to the constitution of meaningful experiences in everyday life.

For Simmel, limits are embodied and realized through cultural forms which assume an independent existence, establishing standards and symbolic sources that react upon life, enriching it. The projection of forms creates a context of inter-subjective cultural meanings which constitute and express (for a certain time) the significance of things for a certain community. This meaningful social order provides a collective basis in terms of values and ideals upon which individuals either for or against orient their lives in the world.

Limits, either death or cultural forms are thus boundaries without which life is empty in its restlessness, leaving individuals to their own devices, a situation which, as Durkheim famously argues throughout his oeuvre, tends to invigorate egoistic, conceited and meaningless goals.

Both Simmel and Durkheim understood – despite their different views on either their conception of society or the specific ways by which this process works - that meaningfulness depends on a contradictory, but basic move by which the sheer impulse of life is engaged with something which goes beyond it, providing life with structure and form.

A secondary effect of the presence of transcendence in life is revealed by the consideration of the somewhat counter-intuitive and uncomfortable reality that even individual pleasure depends on constraints, that is, things that can limit it. For Durkheim, it is so because human beings are marked by the distinct and opposed sides of egoistic (which want to realize all individuals appetites) and social impulses (the need of every human to raise above herself and to regulate his passions), so that any of these parts can

find complete realization without the other (Durkheim 1976, p. 316). Simmel, in turn, would explain the tension pleasure-limit by way of the fact that, in his words, “The attraction of things is not the only cause of practical activity intent on gaining them; on the contrary, the kind and amount of practically necessary endeavors to acquire them often determines the depth and liveliness of their attraction for us” (Simmel 2005, p. 257).

Meaningful engagement with life involves thus a measure of freedom and a measure of endeavor / sacrifice. Unless bearing this, the free individual (free from roles, traditions, values, principles, obligations) and dedicated solely to his own pleasures, is an empty shell that tend to fall under the weight of the lack of the other / of objects.

In a sense, he tends to fall by the lack of resistance against his freedom, for only through its opposite, liberty may go beyond the mere “liberty from something” to become “liberty to do something” and thus, a meaningful liberty (Simmel 2005, p. 403).

Now, the process through which life expresses itself into objective forms which in turn enrich one’s subjective culture is in no way without its own tensions. In his view, the interaction between life and form is not, by principle, meant to achieve resolution into an ideal configuration wherein the first finally sees itself fully mirrored and realized into the former (Weinstein & Weinstein 1990).

Instead, life is, as he beautifully describes, irremediably marked by the tension of being “... at once fixed and variable, of finished shape, and developing further; formed and ever breaking through its forms; persisting yet rushing onward; circling around in subjectivity, yet standing objectively over things and over itself...” (Simmel 1971, p. 364).

In Durkheim (1974, p. 36), this idea finds resonance – even though the appeal of society as something external to and imposed upon individuals is fundamental for him and rejected by Simmel - in the equally irreconcilable tension he describes between society and individual in which the former constrains and obliges (which could suggest that individuals would want to break free from it) but also protects and enlighten (and for this, individuals love and sought after it). Another way of stating the same contradiction, even closer to Simmel’s “...circling around in subjectivity, yet standing objectively over things and over itself” is imbued in Durkheim’s idea that individuals neither can belong altogether to themselves, nor they can live altogether to others. In his words: “To think, one must be, one must have individuality. But on the other hand, the self cannot be altogether and exclusively itself, for then it would empty of all content. If to think one must be, one must also have things to think about” (Durkheim 2005, p. 37).

In any case, through this conflict, life unfolds into the movement of our personal biographies – the continuous engagement with life that impels humans to create, to act, to live – and, more broadly, in the movement of history. So, if the tension life-form, as with any human act, never achieves fullness and complete understanding, this is not bad. Following Simmel's wisdom, it is exactly the yearning, the expectation and the struggle needed to reach valuable things which form the mystery of value (Bauman 2004).

Meaningfulness is thus the fundamental impulse of life in which the overwhelming human thirst for its complete realization is as insatiable as it is the determination to continue the search. As Simmel notes: "...the happiness of anticipation is not an illusion in which we pretend to contain the uncontained and are stimulated by phantasy rather than reality; instead, quite legitimately and undeceivingly, the hope of happiness turns into the happiness of hope" (Simmel 1991, p. 56). Paraphrasing Simmel, we should say that the search for meaningfulness, quite legitimately and undeceivingly, turns into the meaningfulness of the search.

The forms created in the interactions we establish with one another, that is, the forms we encounter through art, science, values, morals, sociability, institutions - cultural forms forged upon the infinity of the 'flow of life' - are the various concrete ways people find, or live by the hope of meaningfulness.

Yet, if human beings are, through the tension life-form, capable of acting in a purposive manner, this very tension renders non-purposive actions possible, that is, the ability to elevate oneself above end-oriented actions (Joas 2000, p. 78). This may inspire a view of meaningfulness neither dominated by sheer individual impulsiveness, nor by a too teleological approach in which meaningful experiences are necessarily purposeful and assume objectified forms.

Meaningfulness is, thus, not only a function of individuals' projects or ends but also of their ability to experience things, to be touched or transformed by impressions, to be open to the other, to the world, including therefore domains of experience which are not foreseeable or predetermined as goals.

From such a perspective, meaningfulness is concerned not only with "the objectification of life into forms", but with life itself. In other words, not only we may find the meaning of life (embodied in forms) but we also (and simultaneously) find meaning in life (Solomon 1977) which involves not only the worth of our desires and affects but also the intrinsic worth of non-purposeful experiences in the world.

Simmel himself submits that even though "the specific meaning of culture" exists where "... the path of the soul leads through values and scales that are not themselves

subjectively psychological”, “...culture is not the only determinant of value for the soul” (2000c, p. 57). Thus, the relationship of the individual with her own subjective powers, with nature and with other people personally significant to her can – to a certain extent – induce the experience of meaningfulness despite the fact that these ‘objects’ are not cultural forms. But it seems that the objectively created constructs of culture “... are stations through which the human subject must pass in order to acquire the specific personal value known as its culture” (2000c, p. 57-58). Without the latter, the continual flowing of life, the “unstoppability of its mere course” cannot take on cultural significance and hence would not be fully realized. In turn, the objective values of the culture, he continues, its constructs and constraints, must be included, cannot simply exist as objective values but must exist within the individual self. That is exactly the continuous tension (and paradox) between the subjective soul and its products that constitute culture.

Concerning the notion of ‘experience’, Heidegger states:

To undergo an experience with something—be it a thing, a person, or a god - means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us. When we talk of undergoing an experience, we mean specifically that the experience is not of our own making; to undergo here means that we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it. It is this something itself that comes about, comes to pass, happens (1982, p. 57).

Now, the ability to undergo experiences is not a function of the individual capacity as if he lived in a monad. Contrarily, and even though ‘experience’ can be seen as something particular to each human being, the broader social environment may, in many ways, obstruct the capacity of experience.

If it is true that experience - not only in Heidegger but since the Greeks - is something which human beings have to suffer and not something to be constantly searched for “...the exclusively positive, activist and subjective conception of experience is untenable” (Szakolczai 2010). Hence, the performance-driven and self-centered contemporary subject will only with difficulty enter the domain of experience and thus, of meaningfulness.

Moreover, as Walter Benjamin (1973) famously notes, the character of life in modern conditions leads to a paradoxical situation: whereas humanity have never saw a time when so many things happen, experience is increasingly rare in a context in which



life becomes a relentless succession of shocks, breaks and collisions (Benjamin 1973, p. 328). Benjamin's analysis on this point is in many ways consistent with Simmel's accounts on the modern metropolis' multiplication of stimuli and objective knowledge to a point in which individuals cannot coherently interiorize it (Simmel 2000b).

Benjamin's conception of experience has a particular, illuminating connotation. This is so because Benjamin refers to 'experience' (not in Heidegger's sense of 'lived experience') but as "... a matter of tradition ... the product less of facts firmly anchored in memory [Erinnerung] than of accumulated and frequently unconscious data that flow together in memory [Gedachtnis]" (Benjamin 1973, p. 314). Experience entails, thus, a sort of continuity of subjective life from the past to the present which combines individual and collective past (Benjamin 1973, p. 316). Still, the notion of experience is also connected, in Benjamin's formulation, with the communication of experience, something which is only possible with the persistence of a collective transmitted culture (Jedlowski 1990).

The awareness of impressions made possible in an era of shocks remain thus limited, in Benjamin's standpoint, to the superficial level of punctual, intellectual and utilitarian implications. For each impact that could establish a mark in the human mind (having thus a worth to be communicated and transmitted) is quickly followed by another impact, without ever advancing into a deeper level of experience wherein impressions could settle, lending themselves to the work of association (Jedlowski 1990, p. 136).

What Walter Benjamin can teach us, in the present discussion on the 'meaning of meaningfulness/meaninglessness' is the fundamental worth of memory in the constitution of a concrete, accumulated, meaningful experience. For beyond the mere collection of impressions deprived of inner continuity, experience is fundamentally a narrative that can accumulate inside the individual to be later communicated, transmitted to others. Negatively, to the subject of stimuli, everything excites, or agitates, but nothing really happens. Rather, each situation is exhausted as soon as it occurs, thereby not becoming a memory and making meaningful experiences barely impossible.

It is worth noting that a sense of continuity with the past seems to be an inherent part of every society. As Durkheim puts it, "...we speak a language that we did not make, use instruments we did not invent, invoke rights we did not found, a treasure of knowledge is transmitted to each generation that it did not gather itself" (1976, p. 212). And since society is the complex amalgamation of acts and beliefs formed by men and women through successive generations (Durkheim 1974), a society lacking memory

tends to undermine itself and thus, the very foundation of meaningful experiences collapses.

For Durkheim (1974), even though memory is an inherent part of civilization, there is a sense in which collective memory, that is, the sense of social heritage, needs to be cultivated as a fundamental source for social cohesion, as well as to self-transcendence (the transcendence of monadic individuality through collective consciousness without which meaning constitution, in Durkheim's perspective, is not possible).

One of the ways by which self-transcendence can be staged in social life is through public rites and ceremonies which help to shield the communities' sacred ideals from the effacement of the passage of time by returning to these ideals "...a little of the force they tend to lose to egoistic passions and everyday personal preoccupations" (Durkheim 2005, p. 43). Benjamin also highlights the role of these rituals in producing the amalgamation of individuals and collective memories (Benjamin 1973, p. 316).

However, rituals should be understood, as I read both Benjamin and Durkheim, not only as a set of voluntary practices of recollection but, in a broader manner, as all those societal processes through which the past is preserved, for instance, by representing it in words through literature, oral stories, conversation wherein 'people remember together', or even in habitual conduct and linguistic expressions perpetuated by cultural tradition. Still, all cultural forms are vehicles through which past memories meet the present beyond commemorative rituals. Benjamin beautifully highlights the role of stories in this process, as something which "...does not aim to convey an event per se, which is the purpose of information; rather it embeds the event in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience for those listening" (Benjamin 1973, p. 316).

Memory resources (which amalgamate individual and collective impressions) are associated with meaningfulness inasmuch as it provides not only a sense of identity but also a sense of rootedness and thus direction, belonging and richness - where we come from, where I am going to- which structures experience by locating it in a continuum of broader, collective experiences pervaded by beliefs and values. This, in Durkheim, as in a relatively analogous sense in Benjamin, means not a conservative valuing of the maintenance of tradition, which can be, as often is, synonymous of unjust and oppressive power relations. What memories promote is the actualization of a rich collective imaginary with which people can link their individuality, and from which they can extract and recreate meaning.

The maintenance of a sense of historical continuity does not entail thus the conservative maintenance of what was there before, but the preservation of the collective past (and the personal memories which contains it) as a rich source of symbolization that warrant the attribution of meaning to the present. Collectively, of course, it is important not only to maintain but also to transform society.

Dissipating doubts about the conservative overtones of his thinking, Durkheim declares: "I recognize very willingly the right of the individual to live in the society of his choice" (1974, p. 56) or yet: "...it is life itself and not a dead past which can produce a living cult" (Durkheim 1976, p. 427). In sum, for him, to preserve memory is not to preserve society as it once was, but to preserve society; even if it is necessary to transfigure it into new forms.

The lack of societal cultivation of memory and a myriad of other cultural vicissitudes linked to the symbolic impoverishment of life may disrupt the open (and always incomplete) search for meaningfulness.

Going back to the argument set in the chapter's outset, this is so because, while animals, lacking a symbolic identity, act and move reflexively and pause only physically, the half animal, half symbolic (Fromm 1964, p. 116) - or in Durkheim's terms the half individualized (as a sheer organic life), half social human being - is always vulnerable to become symbolically paralyzed and empty in the search for a motivation to act and to lead life.

Some of us, at a certain point of our lives, and for certain reasons, feel paralyzed and painfully empty in the middle of the struggle. In these circumstances, no yearning, expectation or even the spontaneity of experience (as we have just defined it) seem to stand. That's when the underlying anguish rooted in the ignorance about our predicament in the world, the 'meaning of it all' and more specifically, a 'motivation to go on with one's projects' emerges, often more powerfully than one may safely endure. In such a condition, life is felt as senseless and depression becomes, in the empty place, a painful reality.

In the next chapter, the different cultural developments and its effects on the relationship of individuals with meaning throughout Western history will be analyzed. Hopefully, from this analysis, a coherent picture of how the order of meaning evolved throughout Western history will emerge, backing the subsequent reflections of the specificities of the current problem of meaninglessness in contemporary civilization, which, today, underlies the 'symbolic paralysis' that assaults the collective social body,

fuelling the expansion of various forms of typical subjective difficulties such as depression.

## **Chapter 5: The shifting order of meaning, melancholy and depression: from pre-modern to modern civilization**

This chapter is going to provide an overview on how particular historical shifts conjured up distinct socio-cultural patterns of meaning throughout pre-modern and, more recently, in modern Western civilizations. Within this broader analysis, I will give attention to the shifting cultural understandings and conceptualizations of melancholy in its relations with the order of meaning culturally dominant in each period. This step will help to substantiate the subsequent discussion on the present-day ‘epidemics of depression’ in its interplays with ‘crises of meaninglessness’ spreading throughout the social body of contemporary Western civilizations.

One of the central controversies in the history of ideas about depression lies in the question of whether depression is a new term for what we historically knew as melancholy, or if it constitutes a new pathology. Jennifer Radden is a well-known commentator of the issue. In *The Nature of Melancholy: from Aristotle to Kristeva* (2000) she claims that the equation between depression, melancholy and melancholia (the last two terms were used interchangeably until the nineteenth century) is problematic, often based on a thoughtless and superficial continuity oblivious to the methodological and ontological issues involved in such an equation (Radden 2003).

For Radden (2003), descriptions of depression and pre-nineteenth century melancholia have similarities, but they also hold substantial differences. First, melancholia of the past eras encompassed much more than modern conceptions of depression. Hallucinations, obsessions, compulsions, paranoia, delusions, a greater emphasis on anxiety and apprehension symptoms were commonly referred in the description of melancholic experiences. Second, until the eighteenth century, melancholia was a condition that provided certain social status to the sufferer, being associated with intellectual brilliance, artistic sensitivity and even geniality, which are undeniably absent in today’s descriptions of depression. A third difference clearly correlated to the later, concerns the fact that whereas melancholia was ‘a disorder of the man’, both epidemiological studies and the cultural imaginary suggest the correlation of depression with women.

However, Radden does not have the last word here. As she herself remarks, the leading historical figure on melancholy and depression, S. Jackson, asserts the existence of a remarkable consistency among these experiences (2003, p. 39)

Moreover, Radden admits that her comparison between depression and melancholia is based on descriptivism, which means that the criteria used to determine whether an unchanging condition, once named melancholia, was later renamed depression are based on the similarities and differences between the descriptions of melancholy and depression. By embracing a causal ontology, in contrast, we would assume that depression and melancholy does not only refer to its observable signs and symptoms but to the underlying causal conditions. Since causes of either melancholia or depression are basically unknown, the hypothesis of a cause that unifies those mental disturbances into a single whole remains viable (Radden 2003, p. 42).

Hansen (2003) for instance argues that even though the difference in the symptoms between melancholia and depression is significant, it only leads to the conclusion that they are fundamentally different illnesses if one considers, as Radden does, that descriptivism (rather than extra-descriptivist or causal models) is the proper model to psychiatric nosology. Hansen counters this conception, arguing that even though it's true that we are not in a position of asserting what causes depression, the possibility of finding causal classifications, particularly causes that are rooted in social, political, and psychological realities should not be dismissed (2003, p. 61).

Moreover, as we hope to make clear, in addition to the similarities between depression and the old melancholia in terms of symptoms and subjective experience, melancholy and depression (in its sociological aspect) seem to importantly relate to each other in their role as social symptoms emerging from specific features of the collective state of affairs prevalent in different historical times, translated to the symbolic language of the individual.

The basic idea implied in such analysis is the understanding that what melancholy represented from Antiquity until the 20th century (through its different forms) has significant parallels with what depression represents today (Kehl 2009a). From this assertion does not follow the intention to untangle the controversy on whether melancholy was the term previously used to refer to the depressive states of today – a psychopathological problem beyond the aims of this study -. Instead, it is based on the acknowledgement of the correlation between these states, not only in terms of its physical and psychological symptomatology but in their role as “social symptoms” (Kehl 2009a, *my transl.*) which, becoming apparent in the ‘individual body’ (always subject to the singularity of each experience) also indicates conditions of broader social pathologies that pervades the ‘collective body’ of culture.

Kehl (2009b) notes that to consider either melancholy or depression as a social symptom of a particular context implies, firstly, that all mental conditions are social (which, as claimed above, does not preclude other dimensions of the problem). Secondly, it means that these conditions reveal (or at least suggest) what is found wanting in the collective state of affairs, or yet, the adjustments between the individual and the environment in which he/she constitutes herself.

Nevertheless, depression of present times has, for sure, much specificity, as had melancholic states at each period of history. This suggests that even though depressive states can be seen as an intrinsic human burden (as claimed earlier, a function of the intrinsic human vulnerability in regard to meaning crisis) it also changes throughout time. This is true both in its fundamental motifs and implications for individuals and in the forms by which it is represented. Concerning the former aspect, it implies that the appropriate analytical categories to understand a particular expression of pathology should necessarily be specific to the vicissitudes of the general state of affairs of each historical time in its relation with individuals. Thus, nowadays, the so-called ‘depression epidemic’ is in various ways a new, specific phenomenon which should be understood within the particular conditions of life in Western contemporary civilization. In regard to the latter aspect, the following analysis will show that either melancholy or depression have been often understood and represented in the social imaginary in ways that clearly reveal the broader patterns of meaning that characterize each epoch.

## **5.1 - The pre-modern unity of meaning**

The story of meaning, as hinted by the above considerations, is as old as the primeval story about the origins of human beings.

After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, as the first book of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament tell, they become incomplete creatures, expelled from the paradise and thus unable to experience the divine powers and virtues, the harmony with nature, knowledge of God and communion with him. From this first act of transgression, the biblical myth tells us, Adam and Eve (and, as their ancestors, all humanity) experience culture (firstly manifested in the couple’s shame before their natural nakedness) and become subject to mortal life: they are humans.

Out of the “... anxious possibility of being able” (Kierkegaard 2000, p. 141), the couple moves from the quality of possessing no sin to the quality of sinful. This is a state in which completeness is forever lost and in its place, humanity falls into the

incompleteness of historical time “... where the spirit is no longer at one with itself as in the Garden of Eden” and where the unity of all things is forever split into opposites, such as: “... good and evil, past and future, God and Man ... present being and his future possibilities of becoming” (Kearney 1988, pp. 40-41).

Lacking completeness, humanity finds itself before the challenge of crafting a solution to the great question of how to overcome this sense of separation, how to transcend his own individual life and find unity (Fromm 1964), or yet, how to live with the unavoidable anguish (Kierkegaard 2000) of having to transcend ‘what is’ in a continuous quest for ‘what might be’ (Kearney 1988, p. 42).

What the myth of the fall captures and establishes is the notion that in its very genesis, humans are split apart from the immediacy of the unity of meaning and thrown to a free-floating existence with its infinite horizon of possibilities. Meaning is thus founded as an inherent problem of human life. Answers for this primordial question as we have already pointed out, assumes a variety of different forms throughout history.

In the Hebraic imagination, the ‘passion for the possible’ (which according to Kierkegaard motivated the transgression in the first place) was ‘an evil impulse’, one that makes men lose all sense of belonging and direction. Hence, this is an impulse that should be countered either by self-denial and other ascetic practices or, in a more positive interpretation, as a drive to be sublimated and oriented towards the divine (Kearney 1988, p. 46). The origin of meaning was thus, never to be found in the infinite horizon of possibilities of a sinful man but in the Yahweh, the Father of all creation.

The wisdom of the founding cosmology of Western civilizations fits therefore to the previous discussion on Simmel’s and Durkheim’s accounts on the need to offset the restlessness, the infinity of life by containing it within the borders of ‘something greater’, an external construct - be it material or ideal - which may relate to the “... flowing liveliness, the inner self-responsibility and the changing tensions of the subjective psyche” (Simmel 2000c, p. 55). This idea, in the Hebraic vocabulary, correlates the purely individual life in its infinity of possibilities with evil, whilst meaning could only emerge from the external relation with the constraining (and structuring) relationship with an external structure, here, God.

Along with the biblical tradition, the archaic Greece had an equally fundamental and enduring influence upon the development of the Western patterns of meaning.

In Pre-Socratic Greece, there was no original God and no original principle guiding and determining the world or truth. Instead, the early Greeks lived within a mythological, polytheistic and anthropomorphic religious view in which a variety of



gods, usually represented in human form and not without contradiction, determined the order of meaning. As such, the early Greek order of meaning based on myths and the Olympian world of gods, implied a very distinct notion of the signification of all things, one which was not premised either upon the idea of truth x untruth, faith x disbelief or upon dogmas which people must either attack or defend with their very lives. Instead, they looked upon their gods as self-evident entities "... no less certain than the reality of laughter and tears, the living pulse of nature around us" (Snell 1982, p. 25).

It was thus a time when, in Lukács words, "... the world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars" (Lukács 1971, p. 29) and hence, as Snell notes, a time when every human act or experience reveals the ultimate meaning behind it (Snell 1982).

When the sacred pervade all things, life is not possible without continuous connection with the transcendent, the center around which life is 'organized' and 'structured' against chaos and formlessness.

Mircea Eliade, in his classic work *The Sacred and the Profane* (1987) develops the issue through an anthropological analysis of the existential situation of human beings in different archaic societies. Eliade claims that for the 'homo religious' of primitive, pre-modern cultures, there is the felt need to exist in a total and organized world, a cosmos which is the center of all meaning (1987, p. 44). For instance, he describes the connections between the sacred and "a cosmicized world" as experienced by the nomadic Australians, the Achilpa tribe. The tribe is organized around a sacred pole fashioned by a mythic divine being that firstly created their institutions and cosmicized their territory. After anointing the pole with blood, the god climbed it and disappeared into the sky. The pole represents therefore a "cosmic axis" so that it is only around it that a certain territory becomes habitable and is transformed into 'a world'. During the tribe's wanderings, the pole is always carried and the direction towards which it bends determines the route that the group should take. The sacred pole is an absolute fixed point, a center which connects the tribe with the sky wherever they might be and, by this connection, founds their world as a meaningful cosmos with determined aims and directions. The pole to be broken denotes catastrophe, the reversion to the chaos (1987, p. 22, p. 30).

Plato's philosophy moves beyond myth and towards reason. In his philosophy, the center of gravity of meaning is dislocated, and "... substance was reduced from Homer's absolute immanence of life to Plato's likewise absolute yet tangible and graspable transcendence" (Lukács 1971, p. 35). Meaning continue to be referred, thus, to

a given Ideal, a superior and pre-existent order dwelling outside the individual, but one now posited as belonging to the domain of reason.

Reason, in Plato's philosophical thinking, was realized only in the perception of an external Good which, lying outside subjectivity, would determine what all mortals should emulate, know and love. Hence, the work of reason was to find (and not to make as it would be later argued) the supersensible, immutable things and meanings independently of individual beliefs or perceptions (Kearney 1988; Taylor 1989).

Beyond the ancient Greek world, throughout the pre-modern era, meaning was externally referred, firmly rooted in an order outside human beings and perceived as something beyond discussion or doubt (even though each particular subject could either adjust to or refuse allegiance to the Good).

In medieval times, the Platonic-Aristotelian metaphysics of Being was brought together with the Judeo-Christian notion of a Divine Creator, in particular through the philosophical ideas of the Christian theologian Augustine. Understanding (of the original truth of Being) and faith (in the biblical God) were thus advanced by Augustine as allies or even, as a single reality upon which the pursuing of truth should be based (Kearney 1988, pp. 115-116).

In social practice, in the long years of the medieval epoch, the Good was determined by the church. Thereby, medieval subjects either conformed to or struggled against clear-cut and socially unified symbolic references and boundaries for what was considered right and wrong, good and evil, possible and impossible etc, which revolved, mainly, around the unity of the divine.

It was also a time of mechanical solidarity, when social cohesion was achieved by the force of similarity / lack of differentiation among individuals, associated to pervading agreement about the various issues of life and, ergo, to great predictability of consequences for either complying or rebellious behavior (Durkheim 1984). A time when all spheres of life were intrinsically and coherently connected, binding the whole of human personality and not only a part of it, as it would be the case in modern conditions (Simmel 2000b). Outside the boundaries of this inviolable origin of all meaning was, in the religious understanding, the domain of blasphemy and, according to linked traditional rules, the domain of legitimate repressive laws and social exclusion.

Under the influence of medieval Christian doctrine, melancholy no longer carried glamorous associations of intellectual depth and geniality as in Aristotle's famous accounts in his book of *Problems* (Radden 2000, p. 91), being instead conceived as a feeling of despondency and inertia known as *acedia*. Melancholy was conceived as an

illness of the soul, later identified with the sin of sloth, one of the eight vices that assaulted, in particular, hermits and solitary monks in the monasteries (Solomon 2001; Radden 2000, p. 66).

As the Brazilian psychoanalyst Maria Rita Kehl (2009a) analyzes, in a time when the church had the monopoly of the Good and the Truth (and thus of meaning) the Christian monks were those who were supposed to know what “the Other” (in this case, God) expected from them. Now, however disagreements on the most faithful version of the desire of the Other existed (even within the ecclesiastic domain), divergences were embedded within a broader, encompassing unity of meaning that determined that the will of those devoted to the Christian faith should resist all temptations and doubts. Conversely, disruptions in the relation of subjects with the supreme overarching meaning could lead to the evil of *acedia* (Kehl 2009a, p. 66).

Even though medieval melancholy was not seen by all as a state over which the sufferer could exercise full control, being instead in the midway between disease and bad habit (Jackson 1986, cited in Radden 2002, p. 20), the weakness of the spirit or the temptation of the flesh were important representations of the problem. The frequent associations between the melancholic suffering and a disruption of the relation with God leads Kehl (2009a) to claim that the medieval melancholic suffered from a disagreement with the Other, in a word, God.

From the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries upward, this unity of meaning was to be unsettled. The development of the cities, the international trade and the gradual formation of an emerging class started to bring a new vitality to the possibilities of earthly life in many European cities.

Firstly in Italy of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and later, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in the rest of Europe, the significant accomplishments in a variety of fields, such as literature, philosophy, art, music, politics, science, religion, and other aspects of intellectual inquiry characterized what became known as the Renaissance<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The term “Renaissance” was firstly introduced in the nineteenth century by the French historian Jules Michelet and, some years later, popularized through the Jacob Burckhardt’s ground breaking “The civilization of the Renaissance in Italy” (1878). This work disseminated and founded the traditional and still influential view of the period as bringing about the end of the Middle Ages and introducing Modernity (Cracolici 2007). This view has been revised, especially by medievalists, and criticized by several scholars (e.g. Burke 1998; Cracolici 2007; Martin 2004) for being Eurocentric, oblivious to previous historical accomplishments, minimizing continuities and adopting a teleological narrative according to which a break with the past inaugurated a fully original new epoch which, in turn, is used to explain the present.

Given this caveat, and assuming the persistence of wide contradictions, either within Renaissance itself or backwards, traditional patterns of meaning centered and organized around the unity of God would come to be unsettled: meaning started to make its movement inward.

By this I don't want to imply either that individuality, as we understand it today, was an indisputable emerging notion then or that the abdication of religious values and explanations was at stake. As Burke (1998) remarks, religion was still a strong symbolic reference at the time: humanists' enthusiasm for classic texts and knowledge did not lead to indifference to Christianity but instead to the attempt to harmonize these references into a single, coherent whole. In respect to the category of 'individuality', the disseminated view of the Renaissance as the age of the 'birth of the individual' has been recently described by some scholars as a myth or, less radically, as an incomplete truth, inasmuch as the dominant type of individuality throughout the period was still the communal type (Martin 2004).

Certainly, however, and not without contradictions for sure, the weight of each of these elements were to be progressively altered within the emerging new web of meanings which were progressively condensing.

The scope of politics, for instance, was standing out as a domain of its own, being established, as Machiavelli's classic and innovative *The Prince* (2005) epitomizes, within the specific affairs of earthy life. Machiavelli claims that there is no possible resource to the supernatural, no divine intercession which may solve the problems of politics. Yet, and beyond politics, Machiavelli's ideas implied that earthly affairs were not always governed by chance or mysterious wills of God, luck, or fate but "... at least in one half of the cases" he notes, humans can master circumstances through the use of wisdom (Machiavelli 2005, p. 84).

Thereby, while the depiction of the so-called Renaissance period as a fully original new epoch might be oversimplified, a multiplicity of happenings and novelties generated a perplexing coexistence of viewpoints and symbolic references (both old and new).

The previous relatively unified meaning could not survive undisturbed. In science, Copernicus was studying the skies and Leonardo dissecting bodies; Renaissance art departs from medieval iconography's aim of 'being a window to another world' towards the purpose of a communication between man and man as epitomized in Caravaggio's paintings; the rediscovery of the Greco-Roman world; the invention of the printing press, allowing the circulation of new ideas; the intensification of the navigations and trade,

shattering the comparatively closed world of the Middle Ages; the onset of urbanization, disturbing the predictability and slow pace of the communitarian medieval life; the discovery of the 'New World', unsettling the traditional image of human nature as a single unity, are some few examples of the bewildering range of transformations witnessed by people living during the Renaissance. These shifts, if not fully disarranged, certainly impacted previous structures of meaning premised upon the authority of religion (Kearney 1988; Kehl 2009a; Scliar 2003).

Melancholy was to assume specific representations in this context. Whilst the medieval melancholic subject suffers from what was seen then as the illness of the soul, the shameful effect of the weakness of faith and the debility of one's surrender to God, the Renaissance subject suffered from the "... pain of living in a world wherein the symbolic field has become indecipherable" (Kehl 2009a, p. 69, *my transl.*). This is not by chance, thus, that many representations of the melancholic affliction during the period associated suffering with thinking or with excess of ideas (Radden 2000)

The questioning of the religious motifs as the single cause of private afflictions associated to the rediscovery of the classic Greco-Roman knowledge would also revive Hippocratic ideas about the humoral fluids in the body explaining melancholy as well as the Aristotelian perspective that associated melancholia to intellectual capacities, artistic vision and profundity (Solomon 2001, p. 295)

Yet, and beyond the reference to classical thinking, if to the melancholic is rendered the prestige of a genius, this can be read as a clear resonance of the new humanistic principles dominant at the time that proclaimed the worth of the will to know. According to such principles, the melancholic anguish that often accompanies the venture of those who search for wisdom were expectably seen as a sign of personal status, as if the gravitas required and made possible by the intellectual dives of great scholars, artists and intellectuals would come at a price.

But the will to know was, in the Renaissance period, as we have hinted above, intertwined with what we might call 'the will for the totality and unity of God'. It is not surprising that melancholy was to be read by some as an effect of the contradictions between these two distinct yearnings or yet, as the anomic effects brought about the abrupt transitions and linked norm pluralization to a point wherein "... the limits are unknown between the possible and the impossible, what is just and what is unjust, legitimate claims and hopes and those which are immoderate" (Durkheim 1951, pp. 252-253).

Thereby, Kehl's sociological interpretation of Renaissance melancholy as the 'anguish of subjects before an indecipherable symbolic world' makes sense. Kehl builds upon the interpretation offered by the authors of the influential book "Saturn and Melancholy" (1964) under the lens of her own psychoanalytic perspective.

One of the most expressive and widely known artistic representations of the Renaissance melancholy is the famous 16<sup>th</sup> century figure by Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia I* (1514). For Kehl (2009a), the figure gives further expression to the interpretation of Renaissance melancholy as a problem of the indeterminacy of meaning.

The engraving is organized around several tensions (all of which referring to the main tension between the hopefulness of knowledge/wisdom and the despondency before a disenchanted world). The tension is immediately revealed by the figure of the winged being, half angel, half woman that stands out in the picture, announcing the symbolic intertwining of the heavenly domain of angels and the human world. But this relationship does not seem fully harmonious, at least not to melancholics as suggested by the gloomy disharmony that dominates the picture.

The winged woman is capable of flight, to reach the heavens of transcendent wisdom (represented by the glowing sky on the backdrop and, also, by the wrath that adorns her head - usually a symbol of superiority (Panofsky 1955, p. 163). However, the overall gloom of the scene and, more explicitly, the bat-like creature warns melancholy is on the way. Hence, flight does not seem possible at all and the complete opposite of movement dominates.

The woman-angel's gloom and paralysis stand in the picture in parallel to the numerous symbols that surround her, instruments of knowledge and wisdom about the world which, instead of the (expected) transcendence, foster mental exhaustion and confusion. The picture seems thus to suggest that, being required to discern meaning out of the immensity of the possibilities of knowledge, individuals suffer from "nostalgia for the revealed truth" (Kehl 2009a, p. 70, *my transl.*)

This interpretation of Dürer's *Melancholia I* is also suggested by Walter Benjamin (1984) who notes that the tools of scientific research lie unused by the disconsolate woman-angel, seating inert before the objects of human achievements in science, as a sign of the uselessness of knowledge to achieve transcendence.

Another tension is identified by Erwin Panofsky in his *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (1955). It involves, on the one hand (in contrast to previous, medieval representations of melancholy as laziness) the super-awake stare of the woman-angel suggesting an intent of knowing and, on the other, the sentiment of fruitless searching

(Panofsky 1955, p. 160) embodied in her overall despondent appearance. In his words: "... her energy is paralyzed not by sleep but by thought" (1955, p. 160).

Later, the great Italian illustrator Cesare Ripa elaborates on the same theme. About his portrait *Melancholicus* (1603) – which shows, in a single portrait, a main figure of a scholar reading a book and behind it, a man about to throw himself into the river - Ripa himself comments: "... the open book represents the melancholic man's tendency to be a scholar, engrossed in all sorts of studies" while, the suicidal man represents, he notes, the melancholic's "... tendency to gloom and a sense of futility and despair" (Ripa 1971, cited in Radden 2000, p 11, p. 15).

From the Renaissance period onwards (as I will discuss in the ongoing sections) problems related to the abandonment of the safety of religious doctrines (and the metaphysical unity of meaning it implied) would rear up regularly. Still, the elevation of 'reason' as the new promised source of meaning and the existential effects of the linked complexification of structural and normative levels of societal life would incarnate, recurrently, as either confusing ambiguity or promised liberation, hovering between the opposites of self-affirmation and self-deprecation, power and despair, control and barbarism.

## **5.2 - The modern turmoil of meaning**

In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, congruently to the anthropocentric tendency introduced in the period of the Renaissance, many different levels of life and phenomena which were previously understood on the basis of the principles inherent to religious metaphysics comes to be conceived through the parameters of science (or in relation/consonance to it). After Galileo, Descartes, Hobbes and later Newton, experimentation and the analysis of the simpler parts of phenomena were the basic standard running through all types of inquiries, including those of theological scope.

Further, the previous account of truth in terms of a self-revealing reality with which one should be attuned to by means of reason (like for instance in Plato's 'world of Ideas') gives way to an internalization of the source of knowledge. As Descartes emblematically declares: "I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of ideas I have within me" (Descartes, cited in Taylor 1989, p. 144), which also implies that truth no longer consists of the correct correspondence between subject and object but of the reflexive conformity of the subject to his own thought.

The Cartesian perspective is, in the seventeenth century, foundational not only in terms of methods of inquiry but also in the development of a historical turning point whereby the sovereign individual arises, the typically modern subject, able to reason, to disengage himself from the world and his body, to think and transcend the traditions and structures divinely established, providing thus an anthropological foundation for meaning which helped to pave the way to modern idealism (Hall 2000; Kearney 1988; Taylor 1989).

From such emerging new perspectives and after new impetuses provided by other intellectual figures such as Hume, Kant, the German idealists and the so-called Romantics, not only knowledge but also moral parameters were to be found ultimately within individuals. The concept of the Good – previously a function of either rational contemplation of the cosmos, or of divine revelation - is replaced by the notion of ‘value’, carrying an ineradicable reference to the valuing subject (Joas 2000).

If previously human subjectivity was subsidiary to an order of meaning beyond man so that human understanding and conduct had to conform to ‘Being’ (the transcendent origin of meaning), the modern epoch hails meaning, in Kantian Fashion, as a transcendental product of human mind (Kearney 1988, pp. 155-158).

Advancing here in broad lines what we are going to see later, while in Kantian terms, the idea of a valuing subject would not harm the universal validity of either objective knowledge, moral or aesthetics, modernity would soon take the whole consequences of this move, contemplating value as a subjective and fully contingent phenomenon above any claims of objectivity (Joas 2000, p. 20).

Another primary chain in the emerging new webs of modern patterns of meaning was the valuing of freedom. From Descartes, Locke, Hobbes, and later, Rousseau and Kant, to name but a few, freedom was envisaged as the basic and fundamental human trait.

In social life, following the process of transformation of individuality which begun in the Renaissance period, the late 17<sup>th</sup> and the following 18<sup>th</sup> centuries would see the development of more effective individualistic values by which the naturalization of hierarchical differences between people, reminiscent of medieval times, gives rise to the conception of a natural equality between free individuals. Inequality has then to be understood not as inherent according to a divine unquestionable order but as something to be tackled and finally defeated through correct management of the (arbitrary) accidents of birth and social divisions (Simmel 1950).



These ideas were rooted in the shifts brought about by the cultural, intellectual and political movement known as the Enlightenment, stretching roughly from the mid-decades of the seventeenth century through the eighteenth century. Following the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the dramatic success of the new science in accounting for a wide variety of phenomena feeds the Enlightenment's 'faith' in the human potential of challenging the old and constructing the new independently of theological constructs.

Hence, previously dominant medieval parameters of meaning such as religion, descent, locality and traditional knowledge were progressively seen as in need of being replaced by the idea that reason should be the privileged mediator between the individual and the world. Still, in the modern mindset, epitomized in Kant, the conditions of knowing the world are not in the world itself but in the subject. No longer was God or the immanent world that would be the foundation of meaning, intervening upon every aspect of humans' lives. As Kant famously puts in the first lines of his essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment*, enlightenment should be understood as humankind's release from its self-incurred immaturity, that is, "... the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another" (Kant 2010, p.1).

In the political scope, the immediate translation of the eighteenth century's belief of the free, rational nature of individuals was the ideal of economic freedom, the basis of liberalism. As Simmel notes, liberalism can be seen either as the economic projection of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' philosophical individualism or, conversely, these philosophical aspects may be the "... sublimations of the concrete economic forms of production of the period" (Simmel 1950, p. 83).

In modern conditions, the valuing of freedom and equality, either in its philosophical formulation, or in its correspondent political-economic promotion of unlimited striving for individual advantage as the path towards the harmony of all interests, was not a move – borrowing Bauman's (2004, p.16) metaphor – either towards the "nobody's land" of sub-determination (meaning lack), or to the "disputed land" of over-determination of meaning (pluralism). Rather, it was (or intended to be) a move towards certitude through the correct projection of knowledge from within the rational subject.

For if the Enlightenment intelligentsia aimed to counter religious authority and traditional knowledge towards universal freedom, this was done based on the belief that individuality was valued only within the general parameters of reason. Plus, individuals'

conducts were also to be governed by the (liberal) state / collectivity to which they belonged (Bauman 2004).

Hence, the fading power of God was not giving way to a lack of answers for the questions of life. Alternative (and also universally binding) responses were purportedly to be found through the objective unveiling of all the hidden secrets of nature. The scope of questions to be answered was wide, ranging from the realm of mathematical sciences and sciences of nature, to the political, aesthetic and normative troubling questions about existence (Berlin 1999, p. 22).

From the perspective of the enlightened intelligentsia, the fact that it was human cognition - and no longer God or tradition - that was to guide answers for meaning, didn't mean any threat to objective truths. On the contrary, in a Kantian rationale, cognition was the single safe road for the attainment of objective meaning.

As Simmel notes (1950, p. 69-70), this was so because cognition was seen by Kant as a resource belonging not to the individual, accidental, psychological ego (that may vary from one man to the other), but by the pure, fundamental, unchangeable and universal ego that is present - although sometimes in an underdeveloped manner – in the 'general man' lying at the core of all rational human beings. As such, the good man was the one who resisted to his personal inclinations and acted for the sake of his universal duties.

The Enlightenment aimed to illuminate the darkness of ignorance, superstition and mystery and replace the asymmetry of doubt and confusion for the symmetry of truth and objective knowledge. In this sense, it was a fundamentally optimistic (and for many utopic) ideal of progress from blindness to sight, from illusion/ appearance/ semblance to essence and being (Rocco 1997, p. 37).

Now, the permanence of a new kind of universally valid responses to all issues of existence (which, as mentioned, would concern not only the human control over nature, but also normative questions about our position in the world, what true values are, what's right and appropriate to do and so on) indicates that if the 'bewilderment of meaninglessness' existed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, it did as an unwanted and potentially corrigible pathology. Seeking what Newton accomplished in the realm of physics – organizing the field and clearing it up from contradictions–, it was reasonable to hope that even the apparently chaotic issues subject to human opinion (politics, morality, aesthetics etc.) were also destined to perfection. After the correct and effortful application of reason they could be wholly understood and distilled from

confusion and obscurity (Berlin 1999, p. 24). Ambitious as it may seem, that was the ideal of the Enlightenment.

Indeed, a certain awe and reverence surrounded reason as a critical power (Taylor 2007, p. 9) against superstition, illusion and also against meaninglessness, since the period witnessed a quite widespread belief that the correct management of this superior force could place individuals in the meaningful world of truth and happiness.

As one might presume, a lack of meaning was not relevant or at least not apparent in such a utopia. Instead, inherently laical things such as Reason, the Fatherland and Liberty become, under the impact of general enthusiasm, elevated to the status of sacred things.

The migration of the metaphysic-theological category of sacredness from its original sphere to become applied to worldly categories is apparently paradoxical in a secular modern context wherein enlightened reason was, fundamentally, the reason of self-determination and thus, a reason without God. The paradox can be understood, as scholars such as Durkheim (1976) or Eliade (1987) do, as a telling indication of societies' need and aptitude for creating gods and linked dogmas, symbols, altars and feasts in either religious or secular forms (Durkheim 1976, p. 214).

However, whilst the proponents of the Enlightenment promised us that a world of certitude would replace the preexisting phantasies of tradition, what Modernity has actually brought to humanity was the imperative of reflection and doubt, which leads Anthony Giddens (1990, pp. 36-45) to prefer the term "reflexivity" over reason as to describe the substratum of the modern condition. Since the nature of the scientific method implies that knowledge is always open to reflection and discussion in the light of incoming information – "... including reflection about the nature of reflection" (Giddens 1990, p. 39) -, the unifying power of reason as a source for meaning was revealed as illusory.

In modern conditions, to know is no longer something referred to and instilled by the cosmic order or something shaped by God (Taylor 1989, p. 143) and for this reason, no longer a place of certainty. At most, modern reason is a promising land of unity, security and moral orientation which soon reveals itself as it is: a disputed terrain of plural and competing meanings.

Furthermore, the unfolding of the Enlightenment's logics – epitomized in the desire to correct every aspect of life and the world through calculative thinking - is paralleled by the unfolding of the mercantile logic, which means that modern reason was from the beginning implicated with market reasons. This reciprocal influence is analyzed

by Simmel (2000b) as the mutual determination between the modern intellectualistic mentality and the money economy, both rooted in the soil of the modern metropolis. Reciprocity lies in the fact that if the enlightenment ideal aims to overcome all obscurity, despising along the way all the uncertain, ambiguous and imprecise objects of belief and traditional motifs, money exists by weakening bonds based on the ties of kinship or loyalty whilst entailing a process of rationalization based on weighing, calculating and reducing qualitative values to quantitative ones.

When money (and the linked modern intellectualization of experience) becomes the main link between people, replacing personal ties anchored in diffuse feelings by impersonal, objective relations limited to specific purposes, it opens space for greater differentiation between subjective and objective culture. As a result, individual development and personal freedom are greatly potentialized (Simmel 2000b).

However, in Simmel's (2000b) mind, the emphasis on individualization and freedom triggered by the use of money - that dominates life in the great modern metropolis - is paralleled by the risk of intense depersonalization, objectification and instrumentalization of social relationships. That is, living in the monetized metropolis, the individual is as free as he is isolated from others.

Learning to live by way of the intellectualized, abstract rules of the modern money economy, individuals lose sight of the qualitative worth of things, experiencing them as insubstantial and losing "... the feeling for value differences" (Simmel 2005, p. 257). Further, they become inclined to be indifferent towards others and also to withhold commitment to objective cultural forms. Life becomes then increasingly dominated by anonymous interactions so that freedom tends to imply in "... a vapidness of life and a loosening of its substance" (Simmel 2000b).

Max Weber also sensed the impersonal, calculative character of modernity, submitting a strong critical analysis of the power of reason to assign meaning and goals to history. For him, science cannot replace religion as a secular ideological source able to appoint meaning. As he famously states: "The fate of an epoch who has eaten of the tree of knowledge is that it must know that we cannot learn the meaning of the world from the results of its analysis" (Weber 1949, p. 57).

According to Weber, the purported worth of science to address issues of meaning is fully problematic. First, every scientific 'fulfillment' raises new questions and soon become surpassed and outdated (Weber 1946, p. 138). Thus, science's immanent logic, he argued, would compel it to renounce the project of creating and defending values and meaning (Seidman 1983). Modern individuals have to create meaning for themselves.

Second, drawing on Tolstoy's formulation, Weber recognizes that science cannot give an answer to the "... only question important for us: what shall we do and how shall we live"? (Weber 1946, p. 143), having therefore no ethical value. Third, it cannot offset the fact that "... the various value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other" (Weber 1946, p. 147) having thus no socially unifying worth.

Modern individuals face polytheism of values with no decisive criteria to inform decision between them. In such conditions, meaning constitution comes to depend on a personal relation to values pursued in the different (mainly occupational) institutional spheres: a matter of choice therefore and not of any transcendent category (Vandenberghe 1999, p.66).

Complicating matters, in the Western modern context of rapid urbanization, bureaucratization, market expansion and rationalization, the realization of meaning through voluntary institutional association may be undermined by a bureaucratic world of technical means and utilitarian ideals.

Thereby, if modernity is an epoch of freedom to choose among values, coercive cultural tendencies - mostly represented by the bureaucratic modern organizations but also pervading all spheres of life – leads to a situation wherein "... everywhere the house is ready-made for a new servitude" (Weber 1946, p. 71).

In such a context, reason has become a functional organon of the will of power, defining stated useful goals and calculating the most efficient means to achieve them independently of ethical concerns. As Weber puts it: "An empirical science can teach no one what he should do but only what he can do – and under certain circumstances, what he wants to do" (Weber 1985, cited in Vandenberghe 1999, p. 60).

The enlightenment's ambitions of imposing the correct and effortful application of reason distilling the world from all obscurity incarnates in rationalization, "...the tendency to calculate as carefully as possible the most efficient means, and to implement them methodically in order to achieve control over nature, society, and the self" (Muller 2002, p. 240). However increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of production - and thus being a basic nexus of industrial capitalism that allows unprecedented domination of man over the world of nature (Coser 1977, p. 232) - rationalization also has its darker facets.

Roughly put, taking place in all areas of human life from religion and law to music and architecture, rationalization means a historical drive towards a world in which "... one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (Weber 1946, p. 139). For

instance, modern capitalism is a rational mode of economic life because it depends on a calculable process of production.

At this point, Weber's analysis bears a distinct resemblance to both Marx and Simmel (although certainly with a more pessimistic overtone) in its consideration of both the impersonal and value-deprived, as well as the de-humanizing, alienating character of rationalization and bureaucracy. In his words: bureaucracy's "... specific nature, which is welcomed by capitalism, develops the more perfectly, the more the bureaucracy is 'dehumanized' the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation" (Weber 1946, p. 216).

It is thus the utilitarian character and complete independence from values that forges the dehumanizing aspect of rationalization. Against the Enlightenment's optimism, Weber foresaw a cold, bureaucratic future world wherein men and women would feel themselves trapped into an 'iron cage' dominated by technical means and obligations stripped of ethical justifications (Weber 2008).

Historically, claims Weber (2008), if once the protestant Calvinist inner-worldly ascetism provided ethical impulse to capitalism's advancement through the rationalization of conduct with the general escalation of Western rationalization, these otherworldly values and commitments would gradually lose their metaphysical credibility and motivational significance. Hence, individual participation in institutional spheres which was, previously, religiously enjoined becomes bereft of transcendent motives in a process wherein individuals become increasingly dominated by the very product they had created for their spiritual liberation. In the utilitarian setting of highly bureaucratic organizations, 'vocationalism' previously indicative of the 'grace of God' comes to refer only to itself. That is, the idea of duty in one's calling incarnated in the methodical dedication to work which used to be value-laden "... prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs", tending to become associated with "... purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport" (2008, p. 182)

Pursuing means without regard to substantive considerations and relegating to obscurity or indifference the worth of ends these means are supposed to lead feeds, Weber believes, increasing abstraction, impersonality and the quantification of values, which in conjunction, increasingly threatens the human need for meaning (Elliott 1998). For by prioritizing efficiency above ethical justifications, the task of personal commitment to values and their translation into worldly goals (constitutive of meaning in

modern conditions according to Weber) can boil down to meaningless compliance to utilitarian procedures (Seidman 1983).

Later, certainly impacted by “... the mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism” - as Nazism was fearfully typifying at the time - in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno would powerfully argue that the process of rationalization, to which Max Weber had drawn attention, realized not reason, but its very distortion (2002, p. xvi). The authors define their critique as aiming “... to enlighten the enlightenment about itself” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, pp. xi–xvii). In any case, they would not realize it without a fierce denouncement of the dark shadows of meaninglessness behind the lights.

One of the central targets of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique is the formality of ‘reason’ as emblematically developed by Kant’s postulation of practical reason as wholly indifferent to contextual conditionings, singularity, sentiments, desires and inclinations, obeying instead only to the universal, rational moral duty, whilst being neutral relatively to its ends. Their argument, in a nutshell, is that after nature (either internal or external) became wholly disenchanted within the gears of calculative reason, these transcendental categories end up naturalized themselves, constituting a new form of mythology. In their words: “In the belief that without strict limitation to the observation of facts and the calculation of probabilities the cognitive mind would be over receptive to charlatanism, that system is preparing arid ground for the greedy acceptance of charlatanism and superstition” (2002, p. xv).

For a ‘slave of facts and procedures’ is alienated from critical judgment and thus paradoxically vulnerable to irrationality. This is made explicit, for instance, in the complete availability of reason for “... the purposes of the bourgeois economy both in factories and on the battle field” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. 2).

In the Kantian optimistic understanding – as Horkheimer and Adorno term it - moral actions are “... reasonable even when base ones are likely to prosper” (Kant 1968, cited in Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. 67). The darkness in the heart of the optimism is however spotted by the authors who argue that if ethical forces are to be as neutral and indifferent to ends as it is the procedure-oriented mentality of scientific reason, they ultimately lose their intrinsic meaning whilst becoming fully available to relapse into barbarism.

Further, concrete life is plenty with opposing forces to Kant’s optimism. That is, if it is true that Kant wants to derive from reason the duty of mutual respect and a (formal and universal) moral law that determine our actions, in real life, “... the citizen who

renounced a profit out of the Kantian motive of respect for the mere form of the law would nor be enlightened but superstitious - a fool” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. 67). On the literature realm, the dark face of the blind obedience to moral duty would be revealed by writers such as Sade and Nietzsche who “...did not pretend that formalistic reason had a closer affinity to morality than to immorality” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. 92).

Even as a means, instrumental reason is, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, self-defeating. Despising the place of language and impressions for the sake of neutrality, reality - in many senses a narrative irreducible to numbers, graphics and probabilities - cannot be adequately described. That is, by divinizing technical procedures and ignoring social concerns, the gradual mastery of nature will inevitably stifle progress.

The acuteness of Horkheimer and Adorno’s analyses are confirmed in hindsight through the multiple ways by which the logic of numbers and the ‘brutality of facts’ still prevails today. Modernity and contemporary epoch are replete with instances of the ways in which a ‘purely rational’ decision – of an instrumental type, that is, a ‘factual’ rationality disconnected from the emotions, the community and the context - can paradoxically lead to a fragmented and very narrow form of reason which, not rarely, fuels irrationality. I shall go back to this later.

Here, it is enough to point out that, in the (neoliberal) contemporary context, instrumental reason tends to become the default cultural value in societies wherein generating capital and consuming resources becomes the supreme rule.

Indeed, in a system ultimately premised upon the domination of nature towards the pursuit of self-preservation and profit, the instrumental, technical reason independently of any social concern is the greatest tool for the system’s legitimation. As the authors note, technical reason “... is as democratic as the economic system with which it evolved. Technology is the essence of this knowledge. It aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of others, capital” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p.6).

The legacy of the *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* is therefore, as I see it, the idea that the promised harmony and happiness purportedly embedded in the ‘victory of reason’ over myth could become a mythology itself, and a dangerous one. For the reduction of all meanings to reason as a “brutal fact” implies the systematic negation of a myriad of distinct aspects of life which cannot be mathematically grasped and enunciated. The effect of this is dangerously embodied in the impoverishment of both thinking and experience, feeding, among other things, a constant sentiment of meaning



loss at the heart of modernity. Putting it differently, the search for the domination of nature by man through the application of this brute factual and calculative rationality forges enlightened reason as a cold, objective, universal, totalitarian and ultimately nihilistic Reason threatening nature with destruction and men with meaninglessness.

Nevertheless, in the heights of the modern epoch, even though some people would complain about the appalling emptiness and purposelessness of life, they were, comparatively, as Isaiah Berlin claims, a minority. The major position of the age was that "... we were progressing, we were discovering, we were destroying ancient prejudice, superstition, ignorance and cruelty, and we were well on the way towards establishing some kind of science which would make people happy, free, virtuous and just" (Berlin 1999, p. 30).

Melancholy was, in this context, mostly conceived as self-indulgency. No longer rooted in the temptations of the flesh (as in medieval accounts), or in the Renaissance's tension between multiplicity and unity of meaning, but a sign of the prevalence of passions over the rational mind.

Following Kant's elaborations on the idea of melancholy as a disorder essentially based on a disarranged thought processing (Radden 2000, p. 198) and other similar approaches, melancholy becomes largely represented within the modern social imaginary as a sign of weakness of those not sufficiently disciplined in the methodic and voluntary application of the accessible power of rational thinking.

In the century of the Enlightenment, those who lost their reason were not 'subjects of law'. Unreasonable, irresponsible and unable to work, insane people cannot be subject to the same punishing system determined for those who voluntarily transgressed the law. Still, the order was to be imposed and the insane 'administered' (Castel 1991).

This was to be realized by isolating these people in the multiple madhouses which arose throughout Europe in the 18th and 19th century. In these places, people suffering from melancholia and other mental conditions were commonly submitted to 'treatments' more akin to punishment than to any kind of therapeutic technique. Segregated from society in institutions such as Bedlam (in England) and Bicêtre (France), exposure to physical pain (as a way to 'distract' from mental pain), drowning, induced swoon and vomit were the common lot of many melancholics (Solomon 2001, p. 309).

In sum, generally speaking, in the Age of Reason, the melancholic occupied the place of exception of those in disagreement with the modern "Good", in one word: reason (Kehl 2009a).

## Chapter 6: Modern meaning and its fissures

“Christ knew that by bread alone you cannot reanimate man. If there were no spiritual life, no ideal of Beauty, man would pine away, die, go mad, kill himself or give himself to pagan fantasies. And as Christ, the ideal of Beauty in Himself and his Word, he decided it was better to implant the ideal of Beauty in the soul. If it exists in the soul, each would be the brother of everyone else and then, of course, working for each other, all would also be rich. Whereas if you give them bread, they might become enemies to each other out of boredom”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

This chapter focuses on the analysis of the fissures on the modern order of meaning in the heart of the eighteenth century Enlightenment and further, in Romanticism. In a second step, some representative modern intellectual formulations and reactions to the problem of meaning in the modern epoch - as philosophically elaborated in the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche and György Lukács – are examined in dialogue with the classical sociological accounts of Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel.

### 6.1 – ‘The individual’ at the center of meaning

The rational consensus of the Enlightenment would not last long, cracking after intellectual and artistic assaults against the moral philosophy of reason and, also, by its own development in the concrete lives of human beings.

The eighteenth century was not a harmonious, symmetrical, tidy time wherein ‘solid reason’ and thus, unified meaning, prevailed in an undisturbed manner.

On the contrary, even during the eighteenth century, the apparently solidity of modern meaning had its fissures. Indeed, worries about the ‘evils of civilization’ emerged almost in parallel to the great excitements evoked by the promises of freedom and rationality. A typical example was Rousseau’s direct appeals to nature and linked critiques

about the corruptive effects of science and civilization on the moral life of communities (Rousseau 1968).

The cracks on the man-made order of the Enlightenment were therefore, we might think, permanent thorns in the heart of the 'century of light'. This means that while a belief in universal truth, reason and equality was asserted, malleability, difference, sensibility, imagination, possibility and even skepticism also excited modern consciousness from its very beginning. The latter incarnates, for instance, in Montaigne's (1993) attack against ethnocentric views of life and, later, in Hobbes' (2008) skeptical view of knowledge as resting not on any kind of divine intelligence or inner voice of consciousness, but on agreement about shared terms.

Further, Simmel (1950) reasons, Enlightenment's own formulas (epitomized in the 'quantitative individualism' of reason and equality) would expectedly lead to its contrary: the 19<sup>th</sup> century 'qualitative individualism'. If in the first mode of individualism the emphasis was on the universal, free and equal individual, the second, qualitative mode, will value its opposite: difference and personal expression. As Simmel famously puts it:

It seems that, as soon as the ego had become sufficiently strengthened by the feeling of equality and generality, it fell back into the search for inequality. Yet this new inequality was posited from within. First, there had been the thorough liberation of the individual from the rusty chains of guild, birth right and church. Now, the individual that had thus become independent also wished to distinguish himself from other individuals (Simmel 1950, p. 78).

The emphasis on 'difference' against the idea of a 'general man' of the Enlightenment also became manifest within several reactions emerging in the literary and artistic field of late 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany, when reason frontally clashed with a context of a strong pietistic tradition still dominant in the period (Berlin 1999). These reactions, although not constituting a fully unified new order - since not all exponents of the movement can be rightfully linked to counter-Enlightenment commitments (Millan-Zaibert 2000; Taylor 2007) - share a set of attributes that warrant their designation as Romanticism. Critical responses were also noticeable in Britain's urbanized, industrial cities, and soon in most other Western cultures between the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In a context wherein urbanization, industry and commerce were becoming the driving forces of existence and reason continuously and progressively advanced towards 'territories' which until recently were outside its reach, explicit reactions against the new rational order start to emerge, radicalizing, so to speak, the ambiguous grounds of the symmetrically arranged order of the Enlightenment.

Romanticism became popularly known for its questioning of the inadequacies of the mainstream views of the Enlightenment project. Against reason and rational systems, the so-called romantics defended passions, and the inextricable spontaneity of all unclassifiable aspects of lived experience. A series of oppositions emanate from this one: philosophy was opposed by art, artifice by nature, objectivity by subjectivity, the sense of universality by the sense of uniqueness and lived experience, order by spontaneity, the mundane by the visionary, the emphasis on future by the emphasis on roots, the valuing of the rational reordering of life and the optimism before the powers of technology by the valuing of 'things as they are' and by a grand sensitivity or pessimism concerning the destructive potentials of the Industrial Revolution (Berlin 1999; Kumar 1995).

Melancholy, in such a context, was again associated with greatness, an experience of those able to come closer to the sublime, to feel more deeply and see more clearly, as celebrated in Goethe's *The sorrows of Young Werther* (Radden 2000, p.181). In the romantic perspective, in a world wherein the experience of the metropolitan life is "... a perpetual clash of groups and cabals, a continual flux and reflux of conflicting opinions..." wherein "... everything is absurd, but nothing is shocking, because everyone is accustomed to everything..." (Rousseau 1761, cited in Berman 1988, p. 18), melancholy is insight (Solomon 2001, p. 314).

Rousseau's literary depiction of the intense (and quite despairing) versatility of a world in which "... the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, truth, virtue, have only a local and limited existence" (Rousseau 1761, cited in Berman 1988, p. 18) is also deeply felt by Charles Baudelaire, although he 'responds' to it in a very different style and even opposing perspective. To Baudelaire, writing from within the concrete life of Bonaparte and Haussmann's Paris with its spectacular urban innovations and "seething chaos" (Baudelaire 1970, p. 94), the obsession of progress and collective happiness was the "treacherous light" of the 'modern theology'. In real life, this obsession boiled down to loss of control, the end of certainties, acceleration and melancholy at the core of the modern metropolis (Baudelaire 1855, cited in Berman 1988, p. 139).

Further, melancholy is, in Baudelaire's poetic formulations, not only a dark effect but also (as Walter Benjamin interprets it) a more productive form of refusal of the

symbolic conditions of this brutal time, recollecting all that the big city disposed and "... looking for a refuge for the hero among the masses of the big city" (Benjamin 1983, p. 66).

In Germany, the early Romantics' central concern was rooted in a profound skepticism about the viability of traditional attitudes towards truth, leading to the idea that philosophy was inherently incomplete, in the sense that it was not founded in any kind of primary principle (Norman 2002, p. 502). In other words, the movement attacked not reason itself but philosophy's capability to articulate absolute truths and establish absolute validity to moral and ethical commitments, an ambition that, in its hubris and pride, they argued, could lead to destruction (Dudley 2007; Taylor 2007). This inherent incompleteness, they believed, was related to the inescapable embeddedness of truth in language, so that philosophy is in inescapable contact with aesthetic experience and poetry (Millan-Zaibert 2000; Norman 2002).

In the moral domain, commitments should be based on the inner rhythm of the incomparable character of each specific claim. As such, the romanticist basically found the sense of their individual and social existences in the uniqueness of his nature and activities (in comparison with others) and no longer in any external, objectively given ideal (Simmel 1950)

These epistemological and moral mindsets continued to reverberate and importantly inform the intellectual European tradition from the nineteenth century to the present day (Existentialism, the so-called *German Lebensphilosophie* movements and Friedrich Nietzsche are importantly heirs of Romanticism). Still, it constituted a fundamental change of both consciousness and social existence in Western civilizations which greatly impacted issues of meaning.

Whilst the eighteenth century's webs of meaning were – or at least in its dominant forms attempted to be - organized on the basis of either the truthfulness or falsehood of causes, now it is the individual character of the person who accomplishes a certain deed (how it is expressive of his nature or not) which ultimately determines the value of an action. In Goethe's words "Your general culture and all its institutions are fooleries. Any man's task is to do *something* extraordinarily well, as no other man in his immediate environment can" (Goeth, cited in Simmel 1950, p. 80). If the cause one fights for is true or false, valuable or invaluable, or in the aesthetic realm, if an art oeuvre is beautiful or not in itself, becomes secondary or even impossible to decide outside the particular voice of the individual who expresses herself in it (Berlin 1999; Taylor 1989, 2007).

The primary factor for the meaning of experiences becomes, therefore, the expression of the inner, authentic self that would replace the previous accent on the neutral truth. The expressive individual thus emerges, from the Romantic mindset, as the ultimate element around which all values and commitments would either gain or lack vitality.

Kearney (1988) describes the romantic manoeuvre towards interiority as a kind of defensive reaction before the perceived insufficiency of the political order, in particular, in its dehumanizing social effects and the visible betrayal of the idea of a better future for all. Hence, the antagonistic conditions of reality were no longer to be tackled with the enlightened furor for transformation and perfection but to be ‘pacified’ within an imaginative realm relatively split from the real world. Modern demands for universal freedom, beauty and unity were thus internalized: the romantic individual sought for harmony within and through his creative imagination.

Further, in such an internalized, singular, spontaneous, passionate order posited by Romanticism, the notion of a single ideal for all mankind, mirrored in the Enlightenment’s ambition of finding coherent and universal answers for all kinds of questions, becomes problematic. The romantic impact on modern consciousness renders the vision of ideals, as a kind of synthetic truth that works for all humanity, as increasingly senseless.

Romantics taught us that ideals are (and should be) localizable human constructs, creations emerging from a context. In Herder, Berlin (1999) observes, this idea is developed to its limits through his passionate appreciation and defense of roots and belonging. For him, every ideal is justifiable and admirable in terms of the environment in which it is constituted and should remain just as it is. Positing ideals as particular businesses of a certain cultural group, Herder’s romanticism disseminates the idea that all final and overarching answers to the question of how to live is meaningless and that truth, despite desires of completeness, is fundamentally what appears to each group to which one belongs (and even to each individual in a particular situation) as being true (Berlin 1999, p. 64-65).

In reality, since the Enlightenment’s insistence on replacing the premodern acceptance of traditional authority by the rational decisions of ‘the general man’ until Romanticism’s skepticism and linked inflation of subjectivity, the issue of overarching meanings and, to a certain extent, even of external foundations (rooted either on God, or society) become problematic and start to fade. For, if with Kant and the German idealists, each individual should dispense with all worldly and heavenly mediations becoming the

immediate source of meaning, Romanticism goes a step further: the idea of God is somehow projected into the idea of man, so that the 'divine spark' was now to be sought in the inner depths of human will and desire.

As Simmel (1950) pointedly notes, the apparent opposition between these two ideals dissolves in the common accent on the cultivation of rational or irrational, general or unique, the grandiose individual.

Now, 'the individual' as a foundation was once described by Durkheim as the "... crucial conviction of modern societies" (Durkheim 1974, p. 59), a sign of the persistence of the sacred (and thus of socially cohesive factors) in the heart of the modernity, that is, a sign that 'collective consciousness' (1976, p. 423) changed but did not collapsed after the emergence of individualist principles. Concerning individualism, he writes, this is not to be understood as a mere antagonism between individual and society since "... it is society that instituted it and made of man the god whose servant it is" (1974, p. 29).

Durkheim's point is that with the complexification of modern societies, which increasingly expand and diversify in its geographical, occupational, cultural and personal boundaries, "... nothing remains which man can love and honor in common if not man himself" (1973, p. 52).

However, a correct understanding of what Durkheim means by the sacred character of 'the cult of the individual' (in its capability to grant social integration) is needed in order to avoid a complete misunderstanding of his ideas.

Indeed, since his early *The Division of Labour in Society* (1984) until his last major work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1976) Durkheim maintains that what is at stake in modernity is in any way the collapse of a "common conscience" but a transformation of its nature. This becomes no longer based on commonalities of meanings and beliefs, or on resemblances between individuals, being founded instead upon functional interdependency in the division of labour; specialized rights and duties; and its moral counterpart: the sacralization of "humanity" (Durkheim 1984, 1976; Giddens 2005).

This affirmative view of modernity does not mean an uncritical acceptance of modern individualism, one which is oblivious to its potential risks and pathological vicissitudes. A permanent concern for Durkheim was, it is widely known, how modern individuals and social actions could be ordered and controlled as to avert egoistic forms of individualism which does not constitute a 'true social link'. Durkheim was aware – in a sense agreeing with both Marx and Weber - that the recreation of a meaningful and morally coherent social life was a challenging task in modern conditions. The challenge

would be overcome, he recognized, only by addressing three major problems. First, the disintegrating forces of either excessive/anomic division of labour (caused by dislocation between means and ends and juridical indetermination of the relations between capital and labour); second, the inequities of a forced division of labour (an expression of class inequality); and third, the paradoxes imposed by the sacralization of the individual (Durkheim 1976, 1984).

The later paradox dwells at the contradictory situation in which if it is true that modernity found its own form of sacredness in the shared, socially unifying beliefs of a new “cult of the individual” (taking issue with the Weberian claim of the dissolution of sociocultural unity and his secularization thesis), it is also true that the object of this cult is not a social one. That is, whilst the very ability to consecrate something comes from society, the thing which is sacred for the modern collective conscience (the individual) does not bind us to the collective but to ourselves. And since it does not, in itself, articulate positive obligations uniting individuals in a common moral life, it may be undermined in its worth as a shared, socially structuring belief. In a very revealing passage, Durkheim depicts the paradox:

... if the faith is common because it is shared among the community, it is individual in its object. If it impels every will towards the same end, that end is not a social one. Thus it holds a whole exceptional position within the collective consciousness. It is indeed from society that it draws all the strength, but it is not to society that it binds us: it is to ourselves (1984, p. 122)

The passage bespeaks Durkheim’s old and abiding concern with the development of individualism (Giddens 2005). Later, in his *Individualism and the Intellectuals* (1973), Durkheim establishes that the sacredness of the individual is indeed the only possible foundation of moral unity in modern conditions. But he also stresses that its worth as a socially unifying force dwells upon the valuing of man in the abstract, a value therefore linked to an altruistic ethic of obligation and social responsibility that far surpasses individuals as particular beings. Otherwise, by lacking its character as a shared, collective belief which simultaneously acknowledges and surpasses difference, the modern ‘religion of humanity’ would boil down to monadic isolation, self-interest, egoism and anomie.

In concrete terms, while ‘the individual’ is the new sacred object - so that respect towards individual difference becomes a social virtue – its ‘sacredness’ resides in its containment within a social framework of moral ideals that surpasses the individual in



his/her isolation. These moral ideals – originating from strong collective belief in notions such as equality, freedom and justice - incarnate in institutions protecting individual human rights, including the rights of free inquiry and private property and being embodied, in its political dimensions, in modern democracy (Carls n.d).

In order to avoid anomie, thereby, modern societies should not combat individualism but extend and organize it (Durkheim 1973) providing the types of social organization in which individuals can feel purposively committed and attached.

This is so because autonomy, Durkheim certainly recognized, is a very abstract and different form of foundation in comparison to traditional foundations (Carleheden 2006, p. 60).

This abstractedness can lead to liberating and even exhilarating feelings before the possibility to decide between multiple options. However, the dissipation of references and limits and the associated need to continuously make sense of the new and unfamiliar, may feed a ‘bewilderment of meaninglessness’ when every option is just an option among others, and hence, always open to change. From this point of view, modern meaninglessness refers to a condition of bewilderment – or anomie, going back to Durkheim’s terminology - brought about by the loss of traditional references, limits, structures, values and ideals from the outside or from above, without any new limits and regulations being imposed, so that the individual has therefore “to create its normativity out of itself” (Habermas 1987, cited in Carleheden 2006, p. 60).

In the same line of reasoning, on the one hand, Durkheim recognized that ‘autonomous reason’ was a central belief of the modern cult of the individual, so that any form of authority should be rationally grounded in order to retain its value (Carls n.d.). On the other hand, he was certainly critical of the modern scientific paradigm leading to naturalist and utilitarian views in which the sole source to guide human beings would rest within a virtually disengaged, atomic individuality and its rational procedures – as in forming a single irreducible unit independent of external influences (Durkheim 1973).

In sum, ‘individual’ and ‘reason’ could constitute, in Durkheim’s view, cohesive factors in modernity provided that these notions were to become operative within a background of social interchanges and duties to social ideals.

Charles Taylor also deals with the paradox between, on the one hand, what he deems as the affirmative side of modernity – based on the moral ideal of authenticity, according to which individuals should be free to determine what is the ‘good life’, cultivating and expressing what is unique and original inside them. On the other, Taylor recognizes the ‘shadows’ of the modern ideal: moral subjectivism and linked value

relativism, “the atomism of the self-absorbed individual” (Taylor 1991, p. 09) and the “liberalism of neutrality” (Taylor 1991, p. 17).

In a nutshell, Taylor’s argument is that the modern ideal of authenticity retains moral worth – embodied in the idea (which few of us are, presently, willing to resign) that individuals are unique and should be left free to choose their own paths in life. This, he claims, should not be confounded with “... the non-moral desire to do what one wants without interference” (1991, p. 21), “rejecting the past as irrelevant, or denying the demands of citizenship, or the duties of solidarity, or the needs of the natural environment.” (1991, p. 22).

As Durkheim, Taylor is not oblivious to the danger that this ‘self-choosing individual’ becomes a disengaged, self-absorbed person whose values are defined, merely, by his subjective preferences. In Taylor’s mind, this has problematic effects on individuals themselves. For unless freedom is rooted in values and ways of living which are valuable not only because one happens to feel drawn to them, but because they have objective worth (defined through dialogue within social practices), freedom collapses into meaninglessness. That is, if values are experienced as merely subjective, there is the risk of the trivialization of all values, so that ‘the self-choosing individual’ ends up not knowing what ‘really matters’ becoming thus unable to choose in any meaningful way (Taylor 1991).

In the political realm, when it is established that “... a liberal society must be neutral on questions of what constitutes a good life”, the danger is that questions about values become banished “to the margins of political debate” (Taylor 1991, p. 18). As a result, all values – beyond mere preference and subjectivist choice - that could avert the degraded developments of authenticity and of instrumental reason and its effects in public matters become inarticulate, leading to detrimental consequences. Detrimental effects appear, for instance, when today’s logic of unconstrained economic growth find no collective values to hamper its legitimation. In Taylor’s words: “Because the only effective counter to the drift towards atomism and instrumentalism built into market and bureaucratic state is the formation of an effective common purpose through democratic action, fragmentation in fact disables us from resisting this drift” (1991, p. 117).

The challenges (and dangers) of the ideal of authenticity are potentialized towards infinity when the two sacred objects of modernity, Reason and the Individual become, to a certain extent, ‘dogmas’ of the contemporary political-economic theology of market fundamentalism, so that reason becomes limited to ‘rational choice’ and ‘authenticity’ boils down to a new form of domination based on social deregulation.

## 6.2 - Intellectual concerns and formulations on the modern problem of meaning

The two fundamental projects of modernity (Enlightenment and Romanticism, materialized in political-economic terms in liberalism) evoked, from different perspectives, worries about the fate of meaning after the blurring of various limits by way of the ascension of the two beloved 'sons' of modernity: disengaged / instrumental reason and autonomy.

Doubtlessly, the new fate of meaning as 'an individual business' evoked not only new arrangements at the level of the concrete everyday lives of individuals, but also motivated the production of an extensive and in many cases influential intellectual elaboration of the possible implications of individualism - either in its emphasis on disengaged reason and order, or in its opposing qualitative version emphasizing difference and individual sensibility - on issues of meaning.

A full account of these analyses surpasses both my intentions and the space I have available. The phenomenon was envisaged from many different and often contradictory standpoints which differ both in the understanding of its causes and in the 'solutions' proposed. If there is however, a point of contact between these multi-faceted approaches to the problem, it is the common concern with the fate of meaning when God, traditional bonds and the certitude of a mind-independent reality give way to the sovereignty of the individual.

In the sociological domain, the so-called founding fathers of sociology were all, in one way or another, greatly concerned with the issue of meaning in modern conditions. Among them, the position of Max Weber was explored in the last chapter, in his formulation of the modern problem of meaning as associated to the disenchantment of life, the ensuing pluralization of irreconcilable value spheres and the emergence of a free subject enjoined to create meaning for himself within a context of widespread rationalization and bureaucratization. In the present topic, I will develop Durkheim's and Simmel's stances on the theme a little further, in dialogue with the philosophical-existentialist-psychological formulations of this tension as developed by Friedrich Nietzsche and, in the literary domain, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The accounts of György Lukács in the domain of critical and aesthetic theory, especially represented in his short but illuminating work *The Theory of the Novel* (1971) also raises some interesting issues for the purposes of the analysis intended here.

These authors neither represent the whole realm of discussions on meaning in modern conditions, nor I am assuming, by focusing on them, that they are the most important voices in this discussion.

In fact, several and distinct voices brought contributions to the theme. The choice of these figures are justifiable, as I hope to make clear, for their answers represent succinct forms which have special worth for the particular focus I want to give to the subject.

Dostoyevsky is widely known by his literary treatment of human values. In particular, many of Dostoyevsky's stories dealt with the tragedy evoked by the dissolution of values in the context of the troubled political, social and spiritual atmosphere of 19th-century Russia. Beyond Russia's particular state of affairs in a tumultuous period of its history, Dostoyevsky goes deep into the modern soul, depicting in an ingenious exploration of the psychology of the characters in his widely read novels, the deep existential torments and disastrous consequences of modern meaninglessness which, in its limits, engendered crime and perversion.

The Brazilian philosopher (and a scholar of Dostoyevsky's literature) Luis Felipe Pondé explains that at the core of Dostoyevsky's oeuvre dwells the idea that there is no human life without transcendence: either man transcends to God or to nothingness (Pondé 2009).

From this perspective, Dostoyevsky sees the humanist-naturalist dogmatism that dominates Western modern thinking (and is assimilated by Russian liberalism) as an illusion. For in its aspiration for an earthly destiny of free and sovereign individuals beyond yearnings for the absolute of eternity, modernity mistakenly idealizes the ontological viability of human beings through de postulation of the subject as his own foundation, an idea oblivious to the presence of transcendence in man (Pondé 2003, p. 258).

In the words of Albert Camus: "All Dostoyevsky's heroes ask themselves questions about the meaning of life ... In Dostoevsky's novels the question is propounded with such intensity that it can only invite extreme solutions. Existence is illusory or it is eternal" (Camus 1991, p. 104).

Through his mystical-materialist critique, opposing the rational nihilism of Modernity to the mystics of suffering of the Russian orthodox Christianity (Oliveira 2012; Volpi 1999), Dostoyevsky is greatly disturbed by the deification of the individual which was dominant at the end of the nineteenth century. Against it, Dostoyevsky reacts by condemning and predicting the failure of Promethean ambitions typical of Western

modernity. For him, modern reason was nothing more than a nightmare of the divine-like individual who turns himself into an “overly conscious mouse” who succeeds “... in creating around it so many other nastinesses in the form of doubts and questions” that he ends up, not despite but exactly because of his acute consciousness, losing every ground of belief (Dostoyevsky 1996, p. 11).

Friedrich Nietzsche, another acute thinker of the cultural, social and moral crisis in the modern era is also in the epicenter of the nineteenth century’s discussions on meaning. Nietzsche’s intent was enormous: not only to offer a diagnosis and explanation but also a kind of ‘therapeutic solution’ to the meaninglessness crisis which, he believed, would haunt humanity from his time on.

For sure, I cannot do justice here to the complexities and even ambiguities of Nietzsche’s accounts on meaning. Thereby, I will limit the focus to the discussion of his most prominent claims on the subject, seeking a panoramic understanding of his (fundamental and widely influential) role in the domain of the intellectual reactions to the predicament of meaning in modern conditions.

For Nietzsche, the moral optimism of the modern Western man was not endurable. After rejecting all immutable values (as those inherited from the Western Judaeo-Christian moral traditions) and tutelary forms, Modernity erected Reason, as we’ve seen, as a new form of the Absolute, hoping that through science, existence could be perfected over history. This was a gross illusion from Nietzsche’s perspective. It was clear, for him, that modern reason was inherently self-determining and therefore incompatible with any absolute determination, or utopia. Soon, he warned, the sentiment of meaninglessness would penetrate the modern soul that awakes from the ‘dream of progress’ (Nietzsche 1994).

But Nietzsche was not to lament the advent of meaninglessness. Instead, he would in many senses embrace the whole consequences of what he considers to be the awakening of humanity in the West from two great historical nightmares: the ascetic project of Christianity and the (apparently opposite) rationalist project of Modernity. For Nietzsche, the opposition is merely apparent: both dwell on abstractions and claim to possess the ownership of a truth above and beyond human life by which the world can be corrected and improved (Casey 2002). This is a logic deeply resented by Nietzsche as the very incarnation of nihilism. Thereby, nihilism is understood by Nietzsche not as a form of conducting life without values and ideals, but on the contrary, a form of life enslaved by transcendences, moral principles, all “metaphysical crutches” which are imposed upon life’s immediacy and flows. And by hovering over and above life they constitute, for

Nietzsche, fundamentally nihilistic mental models or, as he provocatively calls it, ‘an anti-morality’ which is deeply hostile to life (Nietzsche 1995, p. 7).

In other words, the modern rational project is only a form of projection of the same totalizing conception of meaning as the one promoted by Judaeo-Christian moral traditions: in modernity, the worship of God is replaced by the worship of truth. In both, the world and the subject are treated as under the command of either God or Reason, a logic that threatens to “... confine the individual man in the narrowest circle of soluble problems” (Nietzsche 1995, p. 62). This common approach is ‘against life’, he reasons, for the fact that it despises the wisdom of the tragic nature of all things greater than any divine or rational truths, disrespecting “... the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties” (Nietzsche 1974, p. 8) also lying about the inherently problematic and insoluble character of human existence.

Nietzsche stands, therefore, as Dostoyevsky, fiercely against the modern ambition that promoted the idea that reason should measure up the compelling enigma of life. However, in full opposition to the Russian writer, he powerfully rejects the transcendence of God as equally false, a harmful and unnatural path in the search for a meaningful existence.

Against the ascetic, unified truth of the Judeo-Christian-Platonic tradition, Nietzsche submits that when the hope for a ‘better life’ either on Earth or in Heaven dissolves, after a liminal, temporary period of nihilistic negation of all values, humans may realize the opportunity to make themselves anew as a work of art (Nietzsche 1994).

This may sound as a decidedly romantic formulation, in particular in its rebellion against the universalizing ambitions of modern rationalism in favor of an alternative valuing of existence as an aesthetic experience. But Nietzsche would radically differ from Romanticism, at least those strands which advocated a return to the past or any form of ‘pacification’ within imagination. Alternatively, the way out of ‘the sepulchers of meaninglessness’ should, for him, be found in a ‘this-worldly reign of the Übermensch’ in which man shall live well ‘under the volcano’ as the sole master of himself, imposing a man-made meaning upon life.

Nietzsche’s words could not be more contrasting to either Dostoyevsky or Romantic pessimism:

The overman is the meaning of the Earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the Earth! I beseech you my brothers, remain true to the Earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of extraterrestrial hopes! They are mixers

of poisons, whether they know it or not. They are despisers of life, dying-off and self-poisoned, of whom the earth is weary: so let them fade away!” (Nietzsche 2006, p. 6).

As he described himself, Nietzsche was the dynamite “... against everything hitherto believed, demanded, hallowed” (Nietzsche 2007, p. 88), daring to announce the promises embedded within the “death of God” and the end of unified, abstract meaning and all invented idols.

Thereby, on the one hand, Nietzsche took the full consequences of the radical contingency and perspectivism of subjective valuation. On the other, the disseminated view of Nietzsche as a thinker who celebrated or even promoted nihilism (in its common sense of lack of ideals) and denied the need for meaning is opposed by several commentators (e.g. Giacóia Júnior 2005; Nehamas 1985; Solomon 2003) who embrace a more affirmative view of his work. From this point of view, Nietzsche’s oeuvre is motivated by moral concerns and targeted not towards the promotion of nihilism but instead the elaboration of an answer to the existential nihilism that dominated Europe at the end of the nineteenth century.

The issue becomes thus, for Nietzsche, which kinds of created meanings are life-promoting or life-denying (Nietzsche 1994) and not the negation of meaning *per se*.

But for Nietzsche the metaphysical meanings, which have so far sustained humanity, are way far of being good ‘nourishment’ for life. Besides, they were surpassed by moderns themselves. In Nietzsche’s famous formulation of the problem: “Where is God? ; I will tell you! We have killed him, you and I! (...)” (1974, p. 120).

Thus, he reasons, after we have “... climbed the highest and most dangerous peak of current thought and looked around from up there” (Nietzsche 1974, p. 8) we are at least potentially free enough as to acknowledge the fictional character of all meanings and artistic enough as to overthrow the unified truths of the Christian-Platonic tradition. Hence, after a period of temporary convalescence of suspicion and doubt, at least those freer, higher, noble types of human beings will find themselves capable of self-control and self-legislation and will actively help to overthrow the old values no longer responsive to their wills and desires, creating for themselves “... a goal, a why, a new faith” (Nietzsche 1980, cited in Carr 1992, p. 42).

Now, although Nietzsche talks about the creation of *new* values he also (paradoxically) recur, as mentioned, to the old polytheist universe of myths. Against the truthful world of Christianity based on the logics of negation (wherein for ‘x’ to be true,

‘y’ must be false) in myths, one god is never considered a denial of other gods, nor blasphemy against him (Casey 2002, p. 15). As he exultantly exclaims in anticipation of a world that has finally transcended nihilistic ideals: “How many new gods are now possible!” (Nietzsche 1980, cited in Carr 1992, p. 50).

For Nietzsche, this would be a richer and healthier existence permeated by values for the sake of which one may endure life, a logic which does not deny men’s quest for meanings and convictions – recognized by Nietzsche as a human need when he states: “... man must from time to time believe he knows why he exists; his race cannot thrive without a periodic trust in life, without faith in the reason in life!” (Nietzsche 1974, p. 29). Yet, myths have the merit (in contrast to the abstract truths of reason and religion) not to lie about what life is ultimately about: “...appearance, art, illusion, optics, the need for perspective and for error” (Nietzsche 1994, p. 7).

The Nietzschean resort to myths can, to a certain extent, sound as consistent to Durkheim’s (1976) ideas that the future of ‘modern religion’ was to accept its cultural foundation, realizing the fictional, collectively created nature of its beliefs. But Nietzsche’s project seems to grow distant from the French sociologist by his association of a ‘this-worldly’ meaning wherein ‘many gods are possible’ with absolute individual sovereignty independently of collective morality. And whereas Durkheim conceives the sacred x profane dichotomy inherent to religious life as stemming from and constitutive of society and, also, as being integral of both social cohesion and the individual, Nietzsche attacks all religious structure of thinking. For him, all rationality which divides human life in two, opposing spiritual and mundane things; good and bad; right and wrong; ideal and real are feeble ‘dichotomous solutions’ which have crumbled (or should crumble) after the ‘death of God’.

Simmel describes the Nietzschean philosophical project as being at the epicenter of a cultural / philosophical trend of the affirmation of life as entirely self-determining and the utmost origin of all meaning. That is, life can only find meaning within itself, “... in relation not to any definable goal but purely to its own development” (Simmel 2000c, p. 79).

In Simmel’s mind, this is a problematic move. By rejecting the idea that any ‘transcendental meaning’ may impose itself upon the sheer intensification of life, Nietzsche risks stripping order from life, projecting one against the other.

Simmel’s argument against Nietzsche is that life itself is a “... living call to be something ‘more-than-life’ constantly set against the equally vital facts of life” (Lee & Silver 2012), which means that life and form are neither antithetical forces, nor they



belong to separate and opposing realms, but stand in a reciprocal polarity between flux and fixed (Lash 2005; Weinstein & Weinstein 1990). As such, what the person is (actuality) and what she should be (ought) are intrinsically related domains of the individual life. In Simmel's words: life is "... as ethical... as it is actual" (Simmel 2010, p. 100).

In his fervent rejection of the external, universal values in favour of life, Nietzsche condemned the "Ought" as a demand alien and even opposing to life itself, whilst for Simmel the latter is nothing else than *a form* of the actuality of life. Thus, the 'conventional notion' (to which Nietzsche, even though negatively, subscribes) is that "... life is an unfolding subjective actuality which is confronted by the ideal demand of the Ought and that this demand issues from a different order from that which life springs...". However, Simmel argues, "... the Ought does not stand altogether above life or over against it, but instead is precisely a mode by which life becomes aware of itself" (2010, p. 100).

Concretely, one of the problems of affirming life itself (despite or against order) is that, as Taylor notes, "Life itself can push to cruelty, to domination, to exclusion, and indeed does so in its moments of most exuberant affirmation" (2007, p. 373).

Nietzsche was apparently aware of the daring of his undertaking – he was threading on a "vast and dangerous land" (Nietzsche 1994, p. 2) as he himself put it -. But daring was a sign of excellence and courage, an explicitly noble virtue for Nietzsche. Hence, he went as far as his fury against the traditional Western conceptions of the 'moral individual' and his will to dare led him. Yet, perhaps guided by the oppositional nature of his endeavor, he submits (not without contradiction, especially if one takes his oeuvre as a whole) that to affirm life is (also) to rehabilitate "... destruction and chaos, the infliction of suffering and exploitation, as part of the life to be affirmed" (Taylor 2007, p. 373).

Darker consequences of Nietzsche's answer to the modern problem of meaning were sensed by Dostoyevsky. The existential crisis that is repetitively portrayed throughout his oeuvre is one in which the powerfully attraction to locate oneself 'beyond the good and evil' and the feelings of power that this position provide, cannot set aside the anguish and even despair before 'the emancipation towards nothingness' granted by reason without transcendence. As such, "... for him, the Nietzschean overman would not be anything more than an underground dream" (Girard 2009, cited in Felipe 2012, *my transl.*).

The fate of Raskolnikov, the protagonist of his novel *Crime and Punishment* is a good example of how Dostoyevsky treats the issue. Applying the "(a)moral perspective"

inherent to the scientific dogma of the vanguard intelligentsia of that period, Raskolnikov longed to be part of an elite of masterful man, those few capable of putting themselves above good and evil, or yet above the 'herd of common people' destined to obey socially imposed norms. To prove himself worthy of this, he plans to commit a murder without being affected by the self-condemnation of 'a bad conscience'. In fact, Raskolnikov didn't suffer out of regret or guilt, both voided by his rational mentality, but from an "... inner void which cut him off from all human beings without any hope of ever finding an outlet from this cosmic isolation" (Lavrin 1969, p. 165). And even though the idea of crime was really senseless in his godless logic, Raskolnikov decides to confess surrender himself to the authorities; that is, in the end, the 'above of good and evil' man, supposedly independent from all social norms, voluntarily decides to submit himself to the socially established laws.

If murder, and later, isolation was the fate of Raskolnikov, in Dostoyevsky's novel *Devils*, suicide is the outcome of the lack of self-transcendence and belief. In the chilling reasoning of Kirillov, suicide was the highest (or sole) act of self-assertion for a true unbeliever that feels he is the only God. What Dostoyevsky seemingly leaves implicit here is the tragic connection between self-assertion, on the one hand, and self-destruction, on the other (Lavrin 1969, p. 167).

What the Russian writer may help us to realize – through the magnifying lens of his tortured characters and of a perhaps too dark view of humanity as permanently hunted by evil - is the self-delusive aspects, or at least, the perils of modern pretensions of 'total freedom' that have shaped the Western view of life. The tormenting inner condition of characters such as Ivan Karamasov, Kirillov, Stavrogin and Raskolnikov tells therefore not only about the supposed irremediable consequences of a world without religious transcendence.

Beyond Dostoyevsky's seemingly overstated worries with the chaotic and anarchic effects potentialized by the absence of an undeniable (divine) authority, his literature presents us with some pause and wisdom before accepting the idea of a wholly sovereign ego, an idea that negates the fact repeatedly portrayed by Dostoyevsky that we are in many ways 'strangers-to-ourselves'. As Claude Lefort states, "... the individual hides from himself by referring only to himself that he is up against an unknown" (1988, cited in Ehrenberg 2010b, p. 7). Still, I would add, self-reference is oblivious to the fact that we are animals of 'transcendence' having an insatiable thirst for completeness and meaning which can hardly be sustained self-referentially.

In Durkheim's sociological perspective, the impossibility to sustain meaning self-referentially is rooted in a view of human nature not at all distant from the one portrayed by the Russian writer. For Durkheim, human nature is the site of an unlimited number of impulses and needs which can lead to malaise if a process of self-transcendence does not take place (Elchardus & Siongers 2001). Transcendence, however, is understood by the sociologist not as a prerogative of divine truths as such but as a fruit of membership to groups and the linked internalization of collective representations (Durkheim 1974).

Society is thus the fundamental and needed "pair/counterpart" of human nature; that is, it is from society (through its collectively defined social norms and beliefs) that humans' unlimited impulses and desires may gain the structure and limit that they lack. In other words, in the Durkheimian rationale, without transcending themselves through integration in a collective social body, with its specific symbols, values and ideals, individuals suffer and pathologies thrive.

The process by which individual sovereignty tend to degrade from self-assertion to self-destruction is thus, in a Durkheimian perspective, not to be understood as an outcome of the "death of the (religious) God", but as the effect of a more general neglect of the collective / cultural dimension of human beings. For since our constructions of self, moral order, and of the world are rooted within our linguistic interactions in collective life (as discussed in chapter 4) meaning depends on the continual affirmation of a collective moral consciousness which transcends the individual, that is, the cultivation of collective representations which, once internalized, assume the ethical functions of religious moral principles in the modern secularized world.

Conversely, by withdrawing into the interior of consciousness as the sole ground or reason for existence (as projected by fundamental modern currents, from Enlightenment, to Romanticism and Liberalism) individuals are left without purpose and meaningful engagements, whilst *le mal de l'infini* – which Dostoyevsky brightly explores upon his characters' existential confusion and nihilism – comes back from its exile to haunt human souls. Socially, this cultural neglect and symbolic impoverishment feeds unrestricted competition (in dangerous consistency with market reasons), various forms of unconcern or abuse of the other and in its limits, violence and death.

The point at which Durkheim diverges from Dostoyevsky is that he espouses a less tragic view of modernity as capable of developing a system of social cohesion which ensures moral unity after the 'death' of the (religious) God. As we've analyzed already, for Durkheim, religion never really leaves us, at least if one considers, as he does, that its essence does not lie in supernatural, divine incarnations of the religious, but in the

various symbolic or representational forms of collectively empowered sentiments and ideals. For him, what should subsist is moral authority, a force that goes beyond our existence as individuals and provides guidance, which is in no way a privilege of religious or traditional principles. In one sentence: “What is a moral authority if not the characteristic we attribute to a real or ideal being that we conceive of as constituting a moral power superior to our own?” (Durkheim 1974, p. 56).

It is therefore not the wane of the transcendent God, of traditional forms of consensus which, according to Durkheim, should concern us, but the most general disruption of institutional conditions associated to the cultivation of collective beliefs, symbols and values which endow individual freedom with boundaries and constitute a foundation to morality. As he puts it, whilst Kant postulates God (and universal Reason), without which morality is unintelligible, “We postulate a society specifically distinct from individuals, since otherwise morality has no object and duty no roots” (Durkheim 1974, p. 52).

For it is for him the permanence of the ‘sacred’ in society, in the form of relatively uncontested norms which are simultaneously obligatory and desirable (Durkheim 1974), that protects modern people from utilitarian egoism. The later, lacking the both limiting / structuring ‘venerable respect’ engendered by collective representations (Durkheim 1976) is “an ideal without grandeur” (Durkheim 1973, p. 44), that is, a degraded form of individualism. In this degraded form, autonomy and reason travel all the way down from the collective defense of individual dignity and rational lucidity to cold calculation, self-centeredness, ‘the war of all against all’ and meaninglessness.

The disagreement between Durkheim and Nietzsche becomes, thus, even clearer. Nietzsche understood that all ideals beyond life would infuse it with meaning and thus succeed “... in shutting the door on a suicidal nihilism by giving humanity a goal: morality” (Nietzsche, 1994 [1887]: xxvi). Nevertheless, he was also absolutely convinced that men and women could live much better without these created ‘beyonds’. Nietzsche envisages this improved existence, as we hinted above, through an existential solution: living life as an “oeuvre of art” wherein the individual himself should be the responsible to create and impress character over existence. Durkheim, in turn, without asserting any eschatological meaning bringing redemption or salvation, was much less positive about the possibilities of a Nietzschean ‘sovereign life’ lived in its ‘immanence and instants’ irrespective to the borders of obligatory and desirable cultural norms.

The Hungarian Marxist philosopher and literary historian György Lukács will also be deeply concerned by the issue of meaning when "... man became lonely and could find meaning and substance only in his own soul" (Lukács 1971, p. 103).

The issues which tormented the Hungarian philosopher were not at all distant from those that concerned Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche, while his style of analysis was, for sure, closer to Dostoyevsky's. The initial lines of his *The theory of the novel* suggest the proximity: "Happy is the age which can read in the starry heavens the mapped out paths which are open to it and which it may follow! Happy is the age whose paths are lit by the light of the stars!" (1971, p. 29)

What Lukács apparently regrets in this passage is the fading of the anchorage of life in a 'beyond' so that a "ready-made", "ever-present meaning" could be known and even "grasped" by anyone "in a glance" (Lukács 1971, p. 32).

This heaven of meaning once existed, in Lukács' perspective, in times of the archaic Greece, when the question of meaning was answered even before it was formulated. But heaven was not destined to last forever.

When foundations of belief are progressively questioned in modern times, life becomes uncertain, individuals speculate endlessly and the new open universe causes totality to collapse, evoking an experience designated by him as "transcendental homelessness" (Lukács 1971, p. 62). Before the immensity of a universe now unlit, illuminated solely by the tentative light of reason, "... a mere glimpse of meaning is the highest that life has to offer, and that this glimpse is the only thing worth the commitment of an entire life, the only thing by which the struggle will have been justified" (1971, p. 80).

Throughout the *Theory of the Novel*, either in his comments on what he terms as "abstract idealism", or on the nineteenth century's "romanticism of disillusionment", Lukács identifies a threat dwelling right at the center of modern subjectivity (1971, p. 97, p. 112).

Whilst the first values the individual as the carrier of transcendent worlds, so that the risk arises of becoming "maniacally imprisoned in himself" so that "a maximum of inwardly attained meaning becomes a maximum of senselessness and the sublime turns to madness, to monomania" (1971, p. 100), in Romanticism, "... the inner importance of the individual has reached its historical apogee" (1971, p. 117). The "a priori utopianism" of idealism goes thus a step further through Romanticism which posits the individual self as the sole source of ideal reality. The result, in Lukács' view, is tragic. In his words: "... the futility of the soul's existence in the totality of the world is exposed with an equally

immoderate ruthlessness; the soul's loneliness, its lack of any support or tie, is intensified until it becomes immeasurable" (1971, p. 118).

Lukács seems to agree with Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche that the longing for totality remains (even though Nietzsche would hope for a future when humanity could be indifferent to it). In contrast to Nietzsche, Lukács envisaged, with little trust, the possibilities of this isolated subjectivity as the access route to a meaningful life. On the other side, the return or resurrection of the previous state of totality was seen by him as unthinkable (and here he agrees again with Nietzsche), and this not only by irremediably external conditions of life but for humanity's own 'choice'. In Lukács words: "... we cannot breathe in a closed world" (1971, p. 33). This is so, he explains, because "We have invented the productivity of the spirit: that is why the *primaeval* images have irrevocably lost their objective self-evidence for us, and our thinking follows the endless path of an approximation that is never fully accomplished" (1971, p. 34)

The ideas of *The theory of the Novel* may appear as a kind of literary nostalgia for a supposed Golden Age - as Jameson (1971, p. 179) puts it -, and even utopian in hindsight - Lukács himself will later refer to his work as "romantic anti-capitalism" (Lukács 1971, p. 19), regretting the too abstract character of his analysis.<sup>10</sup>

However, the book has, I think, at least two major merits. First, it reveals the illuminating power of Lukács' reflections on the problematic character of meaning in modern conditions (touching several elements also analyzed by Durkheim, Simmel and Weber on the subject). Secondly, he skillfully highlights the compelling ambivalence at the core of Western modern minds. In that regard, with clear resemblances to Dostoyevsky, and even Nietzsche, Lukács illuminates a very contemporary issue. That's the fundamental ambivalence of (late) modern individuals who, as finely expressed in Torgovinick's depiction of Lukács' notion of the "transcendental homelessness": "... are secular, but yearning for the sacred, ironic, but yearning for the absolute, individualistic, but yearning for the wholeness of community, asking questions, but receiving no answers, fragmented, but yearning for immanent totality" (Torgovinick 1990, p. 188).

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<sup>10</sup> In his 1962 preface, Lukács declares: "It was not until a decade and a half later (by that time, of course, on Marxist ground) that I succeeded in finding a way towards a solution" (1971, p.17). Indeed, from *History and Class Consciousness* the problem is no longer conceived by Lukács within the scope of an ontological relationship between the self and the world. Instead, it comes to be understood in a concrete historical perspective and realized through concrete mediation of the material world.

In sum, what Lukács since his young years was able to problematize was, once again, the ontological viability of a fully independent, grandiose, self-sufficient being, a vital issue in these times of (purportedly) liberal and liberated individuals.

The issue is also vital for the aims of the present study. As we are going to argue in the next sections, the rampant rates of depression in contemporary times, among other subjective difficulties, reveal the problems at the heart of a new form of collective transcendence which promotes, paradoxically, the idea of a ‘sovereign individual’ dependent on nothing but himself.

## Chapter 7: The contemporary order of meaning

### 7.1 - Introductory remarks

Which historical transformations affect the collective order of meaning in contemporary times? In view of these transformations, are we living in a contemporary epoch wherein meaning grows radically fragmented, leading to limitless and meaningless lives? These are the fundamental questions that this chapter brings to discussion.

As analyzed in the last chapter, after Descartes, Kant and many others and, also, by the incorporation of this paradigmatic shift by Romanticism and the *German Lebensphilosophie* movements in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, if meaning still has any source it lies, fundamentally, within human beings.

This tremendous shift in the order of meaning is not only a modern prospect in terms of philosophical and abstract thinking. Structural transformations such as population growth, the advance of mass communication systems, transportation, intensification of urbanization, industrialization (and the linked division of labour/specialization), the emergence of a fluctuating but continuously expanding globalized capitalist market associated with increasing self-sufficiency in terms of material survival led, in conjunction, to a myriad of changes in social life. Among them, the amplified access to all kinds of people, to multiple points of view and stimuli imbued in the multiplication of social circles of interaction which are value-specific, have a significant role to play in the increasing sense of individualism affecting meaning in the inherently pluralistic modern metropolis.

In the nineteenth century, Western societies were already living into a much more complex situation in terms of the load of information that affected the perceptual apparatus of individuals. In his *The Metropolis and Mental life* (2000b), Georg Simmel famously explores the issue of how the mental life of the metropolitan individual is greatly intensified due to the "... swift and continuous shift of internal and external stimuli" given the "... rapid crowding of changing images" which stands in contrast to the more smooth rhythm of the small town (Simmel 2000b, p. 175).

In the face of such a varied and constantly shifting stimuli, the modern reservoir of meaning becomes increasingly complex and open to change. In the modern metropolis, wherein "... the relationships of human beings with one another and with objective culture are coloured by monetary interests" (Simmel 2005, p. 237), the role of common beliefs, symbols and of personal sentiments for the regulation of exchanges between



people becomes less central, having its intrinsic, qualitative, specific worth subordinated to objective and abstract rules originating from the universe of quantities (Simmel 2000b).

As a result, since intellectualized and abstract rules are less capable of prescribing rules for daily life, the range of decisions commanded by individual consciousness tends to grow (Durkheim 1984).

The situation is radicalized and in many ways transformed, once again, with the advent of the contemporary epoch. With the huge development of communication means and the increment of globalization processes connecting local, specific realities to global and distant ones (Giddens 1991), reality becomes irremediably under construction and continuous questioning.

Clearly, from the greater geographic mobility and the development of communication technology, national borders – and the individual's borders as well - are pervaded by news and a myriad of parameters of conduct from 'the outside world'. This condition allows, according to Giddens (1991), the institutional extension of Modernity and its penetration within our daily lives, amplifying limits of information, patterns for personal identification and values.

After the Second World War, and in particular in the 1960s, liberation and the idea of "doing your own thing" (Taylor 2007, p. 475) become current and generalized. With post-war affluence, previous forms of mutual help declined and people come to concentrate more on their private lives, contributing to the development of a new ethics according to which life should be the effect of individuals' choices in favor of their own self-realization (Rose 1999).

Generalized processes of individualization gain further prominence through the collective counter-cultural movements of the 1960s decade which, progressively, mingled with the capitalist ideology.

The movement started in a context of moral height: the hope of racial equality promoted by Martin Luther King, the passage of civil rights acts, the campaign for nuclear disarmament, protests against the Vietnam War, causes such as environmentalism, freedom of speech and anti-poverty programs were some of the highlights of the collective rebellion that marked the so-called counter cultural movement. Yet, in various Western countries, the movement struggled against all forms of oppression and injustices of what was then considered the elitist and autocratic world of Modernity. For if modernity promulgated a free and equal individual, endowed with reason and ability to take ownership of the things of nature, these movements denounced, behind the alleged

universality, the dominance, sometimes oppressive, of certain groups and social categories over others (Vaitsman 1994).

Further, unparalleled economic conditions were followed at the time by criticism against materialism, competition and also by a struggle for sexual freedom, ushered by the invention of the contraceptive pill. The sexual liberation discourse envisaged social institutions such as marriage and monogamy as passé and, more generally, struggles were developing, in many guises, against all institutions and authorities that might contain individual choice (Ehrenberg 2010b, p. 228).

The movement was also marked by the emergence of a youth culture organized around pleasure and image. Andy Warhol's famous declaration: "there is no message" and his paintings of iconic figures (by which even the revolutionary *Che Guevara* becomes revealed as nothing but an iconic symbol of the 1960s fashion) set the tone of a wider move within the 1960s countercultural movement. That's the change from criticism to fashion, random rebellion, hedonist consumption, and the glorification of the private self, revealing the capitalization of liberation in an age of an intense commercialization of culture.

As it is well known, in some aspects, the 1960s dream fell short into disillusionment. Martin Luther King and Kennedy assassinations; the internationalization of the economic marketplace and the advance of consumerism; the infamous Charles Manson murders and the killing of a member of the audience at Altamont Free Festival revealed the violent face of the 'peace and love' movement conflated with a 'non-delayed gratification' life-style which was impelled by drugs and sex. Still, capitalism's capacity to incorporate goals of total liberation into its own development would soon become clear.

As Charles Taylor puts it, "... to the extent that the goals of integral self-expression, sensual release, equal relations, and social bonding cannot be easily realized together ... the attempt to realize them will involve sacrificing some elements of the package for others" (2007, p. 477). Among the things lost in the original project, Taylor claims, was social equality: among the US upper classes, emerge a synthesis of 'bourgeois' and 'bohemian' who retaining the sense of the importance of self-development and self-expression, made peace with "...the Reagan-Thatcher revolution, the slimming down of the welfare state, and increasing income inequality" (2007, p. 477).

In such a context, and after two World Wars, Auschwitz, the collapse of the 'socialist dream', dictatorships replacing utopias, the ecological crisis and the seemingly

uncontrollable rise of the apparently neutral power of the market, it became difficult to believe, with the same degree of surrender as before, in the old, grand discourses of legitimation.

Thereby, in addition to the bewildering complexity of the unbounded access to information, contrasting world views and options, contemporary people experience a highly individualized life after the 'end of grand narratives' (Lyotard 1984). This is a time when the previous, grand enunciators of Modernity and earlier eras, in particular the religious and political narratives become exhausted and tend to fade (Dufour 2008) as guiding sources of meaning for contemporary life.

The debate on the waning of these grand narratives stresses the idea that while in modern conditions, meaning no longer stems from a divine but from a human source, this is a situation that, however new, maintains the submission to various, sometimes concurrent, transcendental principles lying at the center of the modern symbolic order (Dufour 2008, p. 20).

In contemporary times, several scholars submit (Dufour 2008; Jameson 1991; Lyotard 1984) that any of these previous metaphysical categories of meaning resisted intact, enduring undeniable decline. Previous 'soteriological narratives' that used to bring order to 'the modern chaos' are relatively absent, says Dufour (2008, p. 28). This leaves contemporary subjects, he claims, without any convincing collective discourse of foundation able to answer the useless, but still fundamental human questions such as "what it's all for?", "why and how should I live?" (Dufour 2008, p. 66).

Indeed, the modern idea of a 'sacred individual' manifested in the valuing of human life, honor, liberty - as Durkheim (1973, p. 46) once described - is 'profaned' after Auschwitz and all other violent, criminal actions against humanity that marked the twentieth century in the West.

To decide what remained sacred seems, thus, to be the uncomfortable question that bothers the spirits of contemporary man and woman (even if at unconscious levels).

## **7.2 - The social role of the sacred and its contemporary vicissitudes**

In order to discuss the blur of the sacred in contemporary times, it is necessary, first, to briefly explore how the notion of the 'sacred' is being conceived in this study.

In her book *Purity and Danger* (1980), the British anthropologist Mary Douglas contributes to the understanding of the role of the 'sacred' in societies through her analysis of rituals of purity and pollution found in most primitive societies. In modern

societies, she claims, this role is transposed into secular ideas about hygiene and cleanliness.

Douglas claims that the secular modern notions and ‘rituals’ of cleanliness are not mere rational strategies based on pathogenic and hygienic notions as common sense suggest, but the expression of symbolic systems which discriminate and classify, on one side, what is appropriate, and on the other, what is not. In her view, these ‘rites’ symbolically express an aspiration (not only of individuals but also, and perhaps mainly, of social structures) to condemn objects, ideas and experiences able to through us into a state of confusion and ambiguity: “In short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications” (1980, p. 36).

Among Douglas’s main insights is the idea that the quest for purity and the rejection of pollution (and also the notions of ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ related to it) implies, in all its forms, a positive movement towards the organization of the environment in search of unity and meaning for experiences.

In a similar perspective, Eliade describes how in various different cosmogonies of archaic societies, the sacred represents “... the passage from the virtual and the amorphous to that which has form” (1987, p. 55) and fundamentally, a reference point, a center from which ontological reality and meaning originates. In opposition, the profane is the domain of homogeneity (where there is no qualitative difference between things) and relativity (where everything and anything can be). In his words, the profane is a “... homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no orientation can be established” (1987, p. 21).

Now, modern experience has taught us that the search for order can become, in Bauman’s words, a “... particularly bitter and relentless war against ambivalence” (2004, p. 3). Bauman points out that while in the past, ‘order’ was a natural, transcendent reality of a world intrinsically organized and hierarchically commanded by a ‘reality’ beyond itself, modernity represented the discovery of order *per se*. Order was now to be built through careful planning; over time, he claims, order (and the desire to discriminate ‘the pure’ from ‘the polluted’ through an overarching system of classification) turned into a modern obsession. A myriad of violent outcomes ensued.

As we’ve seen above, Horkheimer and Adorno were among those who first spelled out that Enlightenment and thus, modern civilization is “mythic fear [of disorder] turned radical” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. 16) leading to ‘slavery to facts and

procedures' in search for an universal order that weakens critical judgment and, paradoxically, feeds irrationality and disorder.

Indeed, within a linear perspective of a certain type of modern thinking predicated upon an equally linear, evolutionary and ambitious conception of progress, the aspiration for order could be transmuted into violent discipline, as it was historically epitomized in Nazism and Stalinism and in the repression of minorities and outsiders. But as Douglas herself was aware, the designation of something as 'polluted' – and thus disruptive of order - is not based on intrinsic properties of objects and experiences but on a culturally defined symbolic mapping which may become, as it happens in some domains of modern experience, too rigid. As a result, the boundary between order and chaos becomes impermeable so that the otherwise meaningful separation turns into nonnegotiable dichotomy. In the process, the potentiality of disorder (Douglas 1980, p. 94) is negated and the view that the other of order can never be another order but only chaos (Bauman 2004, p. 7) is propagated with dangerous effects.

Bauman recognizes a good alternative against modernity's "all-devouring order" in Simmel's thought. Through Simmel, he claims, values which were previously celebrated as absolute and timeless are removed from its 'ideological pedestal' and brought down to a more modest place: the search for gratification which is never fully realized but "... owes its attraction to the sacrifice it demands..." (Bauman 2004, p. 197).

What is seemingly overlooked in Bauman's interpretation of Simmel is that, for the latter, lacking a form which convincingly asserts itself as 'real' (and we might say, sacred) – even though temporarily, that is, being operative only insofar as new 'sacred ideas' arise and reject them – the sense of meaningfulness is threatened.

In Brinkmann's (2004) perspective, this would translate to the idea that individual desire has worth not merely in itself - by way of the impulse generated by the irreparable distance between desire and gratification. Building upon Charles Taylor, Brinkmann claims that the worth of desire lies in its existence within a broader moral framework that determines the worth of things (a moral ecology) which is neither of the individual's own making, nor a universal standard outside all social practices.

From this perspective, we may reason that the delimitative standpoint between rigid attachment to order - the irrational dichotomous separation between 'pure' and 'impure' based on purportedly universal facts which potentialize oppression and violent assaults against difference – and the complete overthrow of order and consequent desacralization of the world wherein all values are taken as merely an issue of personal

preference, is the conception of order (and values) as an artifact of sociality, of human interaction.

If the barbarism of Nazism, Stalinism and all kinds of modern oppression contributed to the historical weariness of the idea of 'order', postmodernism's dissemination of skeptical interpretations of culture, literature, art, history, philosophy, economics, architecture, fiction and literary criticism brought further destabilization.

Postmodernist philosophical perspectives undermine previous ideas of meaning originating either outside or inside human beings. As Kearney analyzes, through postmodernist lens, meaning travels from the pre-modern paradigm of 'mirror' (reflecting an existing light), to the modern paradigm of 'lamp' (projecting light from within rational human beings) to finally incarnate into the postmodern paradigm of the 'looking glass' or even 'multiple looking glasses' which reflect each other interminably. In the later approach, meaning is seen as the quite arbitrary result of the endless play of linguistic signs independent of any transcendental signified (Kearney 1988, p. 252).

Further, Dufour (2008) notes, some strands of the postmodern thinking (for instance, Foucault's and Deleuze's accounts, and the sociological accounts of Bourdier) also started to conceive culture, science, literature, art etc. – previously a means to the salvation of all – as a tool of power, alienation and oppression (Dufour 2008, p. 154). Postmodern philosophies which carried the banner of the denouncement of the hidden symbolic violence of culture fueled, thus, the contemporary aversion to culture and the generalized suspicion of the 'sacredness' of social order.

The consideration of how such processes – including historical forces such as the acceleration of individualization processes, the horrors of Nazism and Stalinism, the role of postmodern philosophy, the changes in capitalism, among others - led to the exhaustion of modern categories of meaning, underlies the discourses of scholars who claim that we have entered, in the last decades of the twentieth century, into a distinctly new postmodern world.

But the postmodern novelties are not so discontinuous to what was already insinuating itself since the dawn of the century. Way before the disillusion of Auschwitz and other developments, Simmel had already identified several indications of what was to come. In his words: "... we have been for some time now living without any shared ideal, even perhaps without any ideal at all" (Simmel 1971b, p. 380).

What Simmel had in mind – importantly in response to the influential French vitalism (or 'Bergsonism') and the *German Lebensphilosophie* movements of his time (Weinstein & Weinstein 1990) - was the emergence of a generalized suspicion towards

the submission of life to any objective form in a time when “... cultural forms are conceived of as an exhausted soil which has yielded all that it could grow” (Simmel 1971b, p. 377) and life began to take itself as its own object of meaning.

If previously, he explains, the struggle against forms were specific – i.e., a struggle against given realities felt as no longer apt to address life’s aspirations and capacities, followed by its replacement by a new, life-imbued form - the twentieth century struggle becomes unspecific: all forms are to be supplanted for the sole reason that they are forms and thus, any sort of shared idea that could contain life within its limits should subsist (Simmel 1971b).

In contrast to the traditionalist / conservative sensitivity to the dying out of self-evident meanings of the past, Simmel calls attention to the active cultural impulse towards dissolving forms for the sake of life as free/ unlimited intensification.

Connecting the idea with our reflections so far, after the individual had progressively emerged as an absolute moral imperative in modernity, the subsequent historical step was one in which life itself – as impulse, as pure immediacy - wanted to break free from every cultural form. In other words, humanity historically moves from the sacralization of the idea of the individual as the sole maker of meaning in the world, to the cultural affirmation - going back to Eliade’s terminology - of the “... formless fluidity of a profane space” opposed to all order and authority.

Simmel analyzes several expressions of this cultural trend within the domains of art, philosophy, sexual ethics and religion, all of which comprising the common pattern of despising, doubting or negating the place of forms (radically questioning or subverting, the connection between artistic individuality & reality; knowledge & truth; erotic love & its institutionalized forms; spirituality & religion). The individual expression of life as a non-objectified flux (Simmel 1971b) is therefore emphasized, whereas everything that goes beyond it becomes increasingly senseless.

Historically, it seems therefore that the wane of cultural forms predates the supposed epochal break of post-modernity, being sowed in modern eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and germinating its first ‘sprouts’ in the early twentieth century.

According to Simmel, it is fundamental to note, the sociological germ of the process of the decay of forms was the modern ‘money economy’. Money fully dovetails with the individualistic trend of ‘breaking free from all forms’ insofar as, being the ‘means par excellence’ it fully surrenders to the human will. More than this, money actively fuels formlessness for it is intrinsic to it the undermining of all that may thwart its requirements of continuous circulation (Poggi 1993). In other words, the modern

money economy is not only compatible with, but also, a fundamental impulse for the contemporary desacralization of the collective order.

In contemporary times, the market-based societies of late capitalism radicalize the role of money as a God. As a result, the idea that life is a site for individual self-creation, in a kind of ‘glorification’ of a sovereign self purportedly independent from social limits and collective forms is powerfully disseminated. I shall pursue and develop the idea later.

### **7.3 - Are we living in limitless, meaningless times?**

In this section, my concern is to bring to discussion the idea of a totalizing collapse of meaning in contemporary times. This will be accomplished by elaborating on the ways by which some contemporary scholars, departing from a common Lacanian theoretical basis, deal with virtually the same concerns that excited Simmel’s imagination in the beginning of the century, that is, the decline of any shared agreement on ‘metaphysical categories of meaning’.

This idea, developed by scholars such as Dany-Robert Dufour, Slavoj Žižek and Jean-Pierre Lebrun is exactly what underlies expressions such as “the end of the big Other as an efficient symbolic fiction” (Žižek 1997), “the decline of the symbolic Father” (Lebrun 2004) or, in Dufour (2001, 2008), “the decline of the Other/Subject”, all of which pointing somehow towards a relatively grim picture of contemporary times as marked by meaning collapse.

The loss of the credence in the symbolic efficiency of the Other / Father/ Subject is seen as the effect of a historical circumstance wherein God is ‘no longer in the centre of the city’ (Lebrun 2004), either in its religious or modern, secular forms. That is, whereas in modern conditions many different ‘Subjects’ / ‘Others’ coexisted in a complex symbolic order, in contemporary times, any external foundation subsists intact when “... no figure of the Other and no Subject has any real validity...” (Dufour 2008, p. 42). As a result, everything rests in the economic, political, legal and symbolic autonomy of the democratic subject (Dufour 2001), or yet, in the discourse of science, with its multiple and equivalent “boutiques of knowledge” (Lebrun 2004, p. 54, *my transl.*).

The problem with this shift is, from this perspective, that neither the ‘autonomous individual’ ultimately marked by the undecidability of language, nor the unavoidable transience of scientific statements can occupy the place of the Master as the One apt to say the ‘last word’ of meaning, determining the borders of what is right, wrong, possible, impossible and so on.



The modern problem of meaning as once analyzed by Max Weber becomes therefore radicalized in contemporary times when, Dufour (2008) claims, the plurality of value-spheres that composed the complex symbolic order of modernity gives way to the decline of all Laws.

From the fading of collective agreements with sufficient symbolic efficiency to organize the social, so the argument goes, the individual suffers not only for lacking the support of the Law (or the Limit) to his *jouissance* (Žižek 1997) or, in Freudian terms, for the difficulty in the construction of the superego (Dufour 2008, p. 82). In addition to this, individuals suffer for the burden of self-reference arising from the absence of a foundation for their discourse (Dufour 2001).

In a time wherein no foundations subsist, the very access to the subjective condition is problematic and hence, different attachments to forms of subjection (Žižek 1997) such as paranoia, panic attacks, depression, multiple personalities, toxicomania, perversion, etc. are potentialized (Dufour 2008; Lebrun 2004; Žižek 1997).

According to the psychoanalytic, Lacanian rationale, the proliferation of these pathologies are understood under the premise that the formation of the subject depends on the submission to the Other (the law of the ‘Father’ which can only work upon the support of socially imposed cultural enunciators). Through submission, the subject organizes and structures himself before the inherent lack of every speaking being: for since language is a merely a representation, subjects are always far from the real, depending thus on the submission / devotion to the Other in order to organize themselves before this primordial lack (Lebrun 2004, p. 30). That is, one can only become a subject if he first submits to the ‘Other’ whereby he finds foundation and legitimacy to lead life (Dufour 2008).

That being the case, when myths, God, and even the “modern sagas of legitimation” lose their previous social prestige and no other collective enunciator arises, postmodern subjects face therefore “an impossible formula of subjectivation” wherein the fundamental “initial support” that may enable one to become a subject, is now missing (Dufour 2008, p. 73).

This leads, in Dufour, to the claim that before the waning of the prestige of eminent symbolic “Subjects” to which individuals may submit (and against which they may struggle), the very formation of the subject is in check. As a result, the new subject-form of postmodernity is psychosis, or a neurotic-psychotic borderline state marked by features such as precariousness, narcissism and openness to fluctuating identities. This is so because what the contemporary self-referential logic demands from human beings is a

“hysteriological formula” wherein “what should come after, comes before” (Dufour 2008, p. 71). That is, one has to become oneself (autonomously defining her fate) before she has submitted to an instance beyond her and thus, before she has become a self / subject.

In many passages of his *The Art of Shrinking Heads: on the New Servitude of the Liberated in the Age of Total Capitalism* (2008), Dufour denies that his argument implies the idea that psychosis (or psychotic tendencies) is an empirical inescapable fact of postmodern conditions. Instead, he argues, the fact that psychosis is the dominant subject-form of contemporary times (as ‘neurosis’ was once the dominant subject-form of modernity) does not mean that the “... whole of postmodern humanity is becoming psychotic” (2008, p. 12). He even avoids a kind of apocalyptic view of the subject by declaring that human beings can certainly construct themselves when there is no longer an ‘Other’, “... by using the numerous and effective resources that our societies provide for that purpose” (2008, p. 85).

Dufour’s attempt to rescue the contemporary subject out of psychosis as a nearly unavoidable destiny does not seem to fit, however, to his own descriptions of subjective formation within the Freudian-Lacanian analytical grid. In his words: “If I am to be here, the Other basically has to be there. Unless I make this detour through the Other, I cannot know who I am, cannot accede to the symbolic order and cannot construct any spatiality or temporality” (2008, p. 26). Now, since according to Dufour himself, “... postmodernity no longer has any presentable figures of the Subject to offer” (2008, p. 53), the outlets outside the psychotic modalities of subjectification seem inexistent or at least too vague to be defended. The feeling of subjective catastrophe is yet reinforced in other moments of the book, for instance when he states: “... there is now a danger that there will be no more subjects” (2008, p.54).

Therefore, and despite sparse and few positive, under-explained observations about the possibility of being a subject in the current scenario, Dufour ends up depicting a relatively bleak view of the ‘subject’s possibilities’ outside pathological structures in a contemporary space wherein meaning basically collapsed before the decline of every credible collective enunciator.

From such a perspective, meaninglessness could be understood as a determined, inescapable fate of an epoch in which the demands of self-foundation debunks limits in a totalizing way while transcendental principles basically collapse. This is exactly the situation that leads, almost fatally, to a meaningless, ‘near-psychotic’ existence, as Dufour sometimes seems to suggest. There are, I argue, some problems with formulations like that.

First, if psychosis is, according to the Lacanian psychoanalytic approach, a condition in which ‘castration was not operative’ so that, in the Freudian formulation, psychotics have not “... agreed to give up something to be part of society” (Salecl 2005, p. 1151), we may argue, as Salecl (2005) does, that there’s still much that individuals give or resign for living in a society.

This is related, first and foremost, in my view, to the fact that our times are better defined as a complex interplay between modern, contemporary and even premodern social patterns than as a monolithic reality we sometimes want to didactically describe through terms such as postmodernity, late Modernity and so on.

Berger and Luckmann (1995), in a similar line of reasoning, claim that although bidding systems of values no longer characterize modern societies – leading to forms of subjective and intersubjective crisis of meaning - a society without stocks of meaning doesn’t exist either. Although universality dilutes, there are still commonalities of meaning that can be developed in communities or drawn from historical reservoirs of meaning. Most contemporary people, they claim, “... don’t wander around like characters in a Kafka novel” (1995, p. 39) lost before a purely contingent existence.

But it is not only that. A person may wish not to speak the language spoken by others in the community he lives, not to work in order to survive, or not embody the traits of what is considered to be a “great person” today (Boltanski & Chiapello 2002), transgressing rules of behavior of how to conduct one’s life as an expression of free personal choices, but she will certainly need to deal with the consequences of his rebellion and in the limit, accept the fate of social exclusion.

Even considering the wide possibility of choice that modern societies accord individuals with, Durkheim notes, one who totally deny progress or at least, the very principle of free examination would produce in modern times the effect of a sacrilege (Durkheim 1976, p. 214). Updating Durkheim to the present, the reformulated notion of well-being as a normative ideal of authenticity is considered by some as one of the avenues of a new cultural constellation<sup>11</sup> (Ferrara 2002; Taylor 1991).

Contemporary constraints dwell therefore no longer, as Brinkmann (2013) puts it, in the regime implied by the previous formula “You may not!”. Presently, constraints originate, rather, from today’s “You have to” formula, wherein “... not to do the possible,

<sup>11</sup> According to Ferrara, while the Enlightenment was the era of autonomy par excellence, ours is the age of authenticity. In the ethics of authenticity, he claims, the willingness to abide to formal principles (as in the Kantian formula) is no longer the exclusive constituent of moral worth. Now, the urges which deflect us from our principles must be acknowledged and not suppressed “while at the same time continuing to orient our conduct to the moral point of view” (Ferrara 2002, p. 7).

not to live up to our potentials, not to realize one's true self" (Brinkmann 2013, p. 103) as the new ethics of authenticity commands, are the new forms of 'contemporary sacrilege'.

Developing the idea, authors such as Kehl (2009a) and Salecl (2005) describe the contemporary experience as being marked by a new form of conflict. Opposing some views on the issue, the authors argue that conflict and guilty remain. Salecl (2005) claims that unlike psychotics, contemporary individuals are generally doubtful about their choices, scared about personal failure, deeply concerned about how others view them, and often guilty when they are not able to comply with these expectations (Salecl 2005, 2011).

Along similar lines, Kehl (2009a) argues that it is not only interdiction that may induce guilt. Rather, the impossibility to address the mandates of enjoyment and performance also fuels it, which means that a severe superego (and hence conflict) is at the center of contemporary discontent. She writes: "... that this severity presents itself as a mandate of enjoyment, rather than as interdiction, by any chance weakens the sadism of the superego" (2009a, p. 217, my transl.).

Concerning, still, the vacuum of meanings and its psychological consequences, I agree with the line of thought submitted by contemporary sociologists such as Mikael Carleheden (2001, 2006) and Peter Wagner (1994) who call attention to the fact that (late) modern individuals, on the concrete level, develop their own means as to avoid the abyss of excessive openness. This means that, in their phenomenological experience, individuals adjust so that they come to experience habits and values as self-evident and valid (Carleheden 2006, p. 61).

In this regard, Svend Brinkmann (2004) argues that despite the pervasive modern idea that values originate in subjectivity, the phenomenon of the human world involve values. That is, in everyday life, values are experienced by individuals as being objectively given, not something chosen by way of preference and personal decision within a value-neutral reality. He writes: "... the disenchanted world is *not* the world of everyday, practical life. In practical life, people are moral realists" (2004, p. 63)

However, as Carleheden notes (2006), perhaps we moderns are not successful every time. Probably we are more vulnerable to be haunted by the 'abyss of choice' than our pre-modern predecessors. But this does not mean that we leave a purely formless life fully and continuously dominated by the sensation of this abyss. Since the task of continuously creating normativity out of freedom drains our psychological energies, modern individuals find ways to forge at least a minimum level of stability so that they

can conduct their everyday lives without being continuously dominated by anguish and chaos.

For instance, the uncertainty of choices in conditions of value plurality can be partially offset by belonging to “circles of recognition” which lend stability to identity (Pizzorno 1986, p. 367). Within these circles, the person is recognized by the values she is using in her choices, enabling a sense of being a self-identical agent through time.

It is indeed expectable that when the ideal of an inwardly generated identity is promoted, while other forms of social recognition retract, recognition by others acquires a new and crucial importance and thus, the center of gravity of the ‘good life’ moves to the intimate sphere of the relationships with family and friends (Taylor 1991, p. 49).

Hence, ‘circles of recognition’ to which individuals are exposed become especially important, helping them to overcome uncertainty through a sense of personal continuity and social boundaries when decisions are no longer so firmly tied to collective, generalized assumptions (Pizzorno 1986).

These considerations, here, do not cancel the fact that contemporary subjects continuously face the weight of ambivalence and contingency of today’s ‘liquid norms’ (Bauman 1999). But despite this fact, a purely chaotic, fragmented, ‘profane life’<sup>12</sup> does not seem to be an empirical reality for the majority of us.

As Berger and Luckmann (1995) note, modern societies introduced new forms for the production and communication of meaning, such as psychotherapies, psychoanalysis, lectures, courses, self-help books and other forms of mass media such as television. The latter has, in modern conditions, the fundamental role of meaning dissemination (a role previously fulfilled only by parents, teachers, priests etc). According to the authors, “... they mediate between collective and private experiences by providing a typical interpretation for problems which are defined as typical” (Berger and Luckmann 1995, p. 51).

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<sup>12</sup> As hinted above, both Douglas and Eliade claim that the symbolic quest for order / purity / sacredness is maintained, even if in transmuted and often vestigial / camouflaged religious forms, regardless of the degree to which the world may have been desacralized. As examples, Eliade cites the permanence of sentiments of renewal in festivals such as New Year’s Eve; the mythological function of reading and cinema, which “... takes over and employs countless mythical motifs - the fight between hero and monster, initiatory combats and ordeals, paradigmatic figures and images (the maiden, the hero, the paradisiacal landscape, hell, and so on)” (Eliade 1987, p. 205). One should question the degree in which mystical motifs lose their symbolic vitality as sources of meaning when they are framed – as often occurs today - within a narrative of ‘individual exceptionality’ or when they seem to represent more a ‘escape’ through a socially crippled kind of fantasy than a realization of meaning through fantasy. Even so, behind the commoditization of these forms, we can find vestiges of religious behavior and, simultaneously, nostalgia for it.

In particular, Salecl (2011) claims, the fact that contemporary individuals have been too frequently recurring to ‘specialist advice’ also suggests that the idea of a ‘limitless society’ should be brought into question (at least in its totalizing overtones). Salecl argues that even though there is today a “... push towards excessive jouissance” (2005, p. 1154), there is a difference between a society without limits and the capitalist, neoliberal “... ideology that *depicts* that society as being without limits” (2011, p.12). This ideological depiction plays over the limitless enjoyment as a power fuel for the legitimation of a consumer society based on perpetual dissatisfaction and endless choice. Thus, Salecl sounds correct when she writes: “...it seems clear that the ideology that there are no authorities rests on new authorities, such as corporations” (2005, p. 1152). But this cannot be confused, she claims, with what happens in real life, with real people. In everyday life, fewer external prohibitions coexist with the creation of various forms of inner constraints as revealed by emerging self-management techniques aiming to control virtually all levels of life, from love and familial relationships, work, health, self-image, emotions and even death.

Salecl notes that contemporary subjects create “... ever new limits in order to keep their desire alive: they have invented new prohibitions of their own to curb their society’s push to enjoyment” (2011, p. 12).

However, since all these techniques of self-management are also part of market circuits (one is continuously seduced to pay for her health, self-image, emotional well-being, aging and so on and, yet, given the fact that ‘self-creation’ is a fundamental condition for deregulated capitalism), they represent not only individuals’ psychic adjustment to a limitless environment but also the effect created by a widely disseminated idea: the generalized purported neoliberal ‘truth’ that we can and should master all aspects of life. The ‘tyranny of choice’ is thereby, and importantly, a product of capitalist societies.

Now, I think Dufour does recognize, to a certain extent, all this. He is careful enough (as I hinted above) to explicitly state that even though psychotic tendencies are now the dominant subject-form, this is not to say that humanity as a whole is becoming psychotic in postmodern, Western civilizations. To justify this, he explains that “... not everything in the world has become postmodern (...) And besides, even when the postmodern offensive is at its height, there is still some resistance, for the time being at least”. This resistance remains operative, he continues, “... wherever there are living institutions and wherever not everything has been deregulated” (2008: 12). In addition to this, he also remarks that the “near-psychotic form” he is talking about cannot be

correctly understood by merely drawing on what is already known (in the psychoanalytic discourse) about psychosis (2008, p. 67). Rather, psychosis in Dufour rationale is directly associated with the emergence of a plethora of precarious subjects readily available to live in a world of images, consumption and artificial identities, who are to a certain extent the ‘products’ of a time when commodities tend to surpass, in prestige, other forms of social exchange.

This sounds less totalizing or catastrophic for sure, but Dufour does not elaborate on the issue of which ‘living institutions’ would protect contemporary individuals from inescapable meaninglessness, probably because it was not his focus.

From a Lacanian-inflected perspective, Dufour was worried with the effects of a self-referential rather than a hetero-referential manner of defining life in contemporary times. That’s a condition, he writes, wherein there is no Other that transcendently legitimizes discourse and “... tolerates on our behalf, the things that we ourselves cannot tolerate” (Dufour 2008, p. 19). What Dufour has in mind here is the question of origins, ends and order, in a word, of meaning – which is possible only by way of reference to “presentable Others” (2008, p. 69).

The self-referential logic that dominates the contemporary condition, he reasons, ultimately point back towards the “torments of self-foundation” (Dufour 2008, p. 64), establishing, at most, only dual relationships. Thus, “When conflict does break out between two actors, there can be no appeal to a law (a universal law laid down in the name of a Third), but only to a (local) procedure which gets the circuits working again” (Dufour 2008, p. 65).

Žižek elaborates on the issue by claiming that there is a fundamental gap between the “proper” authority of the symbolic law/prohibition and the mere “regulation by rules/norms”. Paradoxically, he notes, the domain of symbolic rules, to count as such, must be grounded in some (tautological) authority beyond rules, which commands “It is like this because I said it is like this!” (Žižek 1997, p.1). The same idea is found in the accounts of the French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jean-Pierre Lebrun, who explains that in order to exist a “symbolic Father” there must exist an enunciation which, for its incontestable character (and thus fundamentally distinct or even opposed to the discourse of the science) constitutes a Third (Lebrun 2001, p. 49).

Therefore, what is implied in the “paternal decline” in a contemporary context is the exhaustion of the symbolic (and not real) Law which tautologically asserts itself as an authority: “the One not there” which establishes societies as a homogeneous symbolic ensemble (Dufour 2008, p. 65). The empty place left by the fading of this authority is,

according to this perspective, exactly the terrain where these proto-authorities - as the totalitarian power of political leaders, the great present appeal of sensual spectacles (Žižek 1997) and commercial messages, self-help literature and, more generally, the 'tyranny of the market' - can thrive.

Durkheim is, in many ways, 'the silent partner' of Dufour *et al.* Many of his ideas are consistent with the ideas of the cited scholars, although transfigured, in each case, through the lens of respectively, sociological thinking and psychoanalysis. As Lash (2005, p. 1), observes, "... the symbolic, taken from the work of Jacques Lacan, is to a certain extent Durkheim's conscience collective, as it were, grafted onto the Freudian Oedipus complex".

First and foremost, the idea that in order to be constituted as a subject human beings have first (and necessarily) to submit to an instance greater and beyond them is, as we have explored to a significant length, very much in line with Durkheim's thinking. I am not going to rehearse his arguments here. Sufficient is to add that, for Durkheim, the nature of commands capable to submit and thus found human beings beyond their instinctive impulses cannot be merely utilitarian in character so that consequences result from the act of violation (Durkheim 1974). Instead, commands hold their authoritative, foundational force upon the fact that they are collectively determined laws and thus sacred (which means that they are, also in Durkheim, symbolic and not merely real laws).

The tautological and uncontestable character of the Law of the Father (which holds, in the psychoanalytic stance, a strict link with collectively imposed enunciators) is also consistent to Durkheim's thinking. In his words: "This is why commands generally take a short, preemptory form leaving no place for hesitation; it is because, insofar as it is a command and goes by its own force, it excludes all idea of deliberation or calculation" (Durkheim 1976, p. 207).

Now, Durkheim is well known by his idea that the transcendental quality of the social is maintained by its 'collective representations' - the body of representations a society uses to represent to itself things in reality - which hold a linguistic nature (Durkheim 2005). Important is to note that, in Durkheim's accounts, those collective representations - which constitute conceptual thought and language - are not mere reflections of reality. By the very act of representation, language infuses reality with elements of a society's collective experience, endowing it with order, meaning and value (Carls n.d.). As such, as long as individuals speak with each other, society persists and thus 'meaning' continues to circulate.



In addition to language, any kind of domestic, civic or contractual duties; moral maxims; groundswells of public opinion; beliefs and practices/customs transmitted from the past by education; ‘articles of faith’ by which religious, political, economic, professional organizations condensate their beliefs; collective feelings in communal gatherings; institutions like marriage, the specific temporal regimes we must follow which organize our perceptions, conducts and our coexistence with others - or any social practice or idea that is repeated among individuals as a model of life imposed by the group - constitute, to go back to Dufour’s expression, ‘living institutions’ that serve to regulate society (Lukes 1977).

Yet, inasmuch as morality begins with group membership, however small the group might be, or however small is the number of shared beliefs we have in common to our fellow human beings in a certain community (the nation, the family, the city) (Durkheim 1974, p. 52), a degree of social cohesion is preserved. From such a perspective, Durkheim would perhaps argue that the postmodern psychotic subject-form as formulated by Dufour is, at worst (as Dufour himself admits) only an emergent tendency<sup>13</sup>.

There is still another critical aspect of the ideas of moral decline in conditions of weakening of collective agreements (shared, as we have just seen, by both Dufour and Durkheim) that deserves analysis. These ideas, drawing upon, or being consonant to Freudian assumptions that subjective formation depends on masculine relations of separation, repression and authority, can be called into question.

The strict fidelity to this analytical grid, I think, may obstruct considerations for the potentiality of new, historically emerging possibilities of different forms of subjectification, based less on the repressive-style, masculine Law of the Father, to be premised instead on a more feminine ethos of care, subjectivity, listening and emotion.

The later ethos, it is necessary to stress, does not necessarily conflate with either self-centeredness, narcissism or the denial of humans’ intersubjective nature (Hookway 2012) as it is often suggested.

For sure, the demands of authenticity can possibly be related to an empty urge to know oneself as Sennett (1978) critically described, or as an excessively “intense

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<sup>13</sup> Dufour and the other psychoanalysis-informed scholars cited earlier also recognize, in consonance to their Lacanian perspective, that the discourse is the ultimate means through which the symbolic function is transmitted. In this regard, Dufour identifies, however, several ways by which the “gift of symbolic transmission” through discourse has been under attack in the contemporary period. For lacking Subjects to which it can appeal, the “authority of the word” in contemporary societies is weakened, a process which has been reproduced and reinforced, he claims, by television and education (see Dufour 2008, pp. 101- 119).

preoccupation with the self” and “self-absorption” feeding a “culture of narcissism” as in Lasch’s (1991, p. 25) famous formulation.

But what these kinds of descriptions may overlook is the fact that the new “ethics of authenticity” can also, alternatively, be a means through which one knows oneself in the world and morally relates oneself to it (Ferrara 2002), or yet, with Charles Taylor “... a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where better and higher are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire” (Taylor 1991, p. 16). According to Taylor, this is so because whereas the ideal of authenticity leads the individual to pursue what is original and significant to him as a particular, unique being, the definition of what is authentic / more significant for oneself is necessarily “... enframed in a social understanding of great temporal depth, in fact, in a tradition” (Taylor 1989, p. 39).

Zygmunt Bauman stands out between those critical of perspectives which, he claims, reproduce the modern ideal of a morality fully dependent on the “... training/drilling job performed by society” and its shared Laws, while ignoring that this very ideal may be a source of immorality, recasting as inferior those forms of life which do not submit to Reason or to traditional agreements (Bauman 1993, p. 226).

Bauman explicitly contradicts Durkheim (and also Rousseau, Spencer and Freud) in their common consideration that individual freedom can only have morally positive consequences if it surrenders to heteronomously set standards, submitting to them (1993, p. 29). For Bauman, as he defines it in his “Postmodern ethics”, morality is fundamentally a matter of moral feelings and emotions commanded in unconditional responsibility to the Other. Building upon Levinas, he claims that morality commands individuals to be responsible as the only way towards ethical proximity with the other (Bauman 1993, p. 86).

It is not the place here and it is not my intention to analyze all the philosophical issues embedded in the discussions on the moral worth of ‘authenticity’, nor to untangle Bauman’s accounts on postmodern morality in its contrasts with Durkheim and others. What I think deserves consideration is the problematization of one-dimensional views according to which the so-called ‘Law of the Father’ and its ‘submission logics’ is the sole existing way out of a fully immoral, chaotic and psychotically driven social existence.

One of the valuable accomplishments of Bauman’s postmodern ethics, I think, is therefore to unveil both the lies and the darkness within prior forms of socially marshaled morality and, yet, to emphasize, with the sophistication needed to the work at hand, the

moral potential of facing up to ambivalence and linked individual responsibility (Bauman 1993, p. 14).

This is not that Bauman does not recognize the dangers of celebrating the demise of the ethical, or of a one-sided promotion of the so-called unencumbered, autonomous self. In fact, he points out (and rejects) some common ‘easy solutions’ for the new contemporary predicament such as indifference to moral concerns; the radical individualist stance which rejects all moral dictates; and the refusal to ‘choose between choices’ incarnated in ‘the anything goes’ of relativism. He also acknowledges that the alternative out of, on one side, universality of socially imposed submission and, on the other, autonomy is needed: for each “drug” he states, “... turns into poison when taken regularly” (Bauman 1993, p. 239).

Simmel’s analysis of the ‘life-form dialectics’ contributes to find a way out of, on the one hand, the totalizing prevalence of meaninglessness over the totality of the social body after the metaphysical orders of meaning lose prestige and, on the other, the alternative celebration of autonomous life as the sole foundation for meaning independently of cultural forms.

Simmel’s life-form tension starts from the premise, visibly close to Dufour’s view, that individuals are not complete and self-sufficient and thus that the life of each individual forms a unity with the ‘not yet’ (Noch-Nicht) of the future (Simmel 1999, cited in Pyyhtinen 2012) impelling life to transcend itself into cultural forms<sup>14</sup>. Further, Simmel shares Dufour’s concern with, in his terms, the “abyss of non-formed life” when, as of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, individuals tend not to tolerate subservience to objectivized forms which they know to be their own product.

But his concern does not lead him to assume a catastrophic view of the present civilization and of the vicissitudes of the subjective formation in a time when there are no longer prestigious Others or, in Simmel’s terms, when “all forms are denied” (Simmel 1971b).

First, Simmel’s interactional view of society implies that if deinstitutionalization is an undeniable important change in modern conditions, bringing consequences for individuals (the upheaval of institutions such as the nation and the church) “... there exists an immeasurable number of less conspicuous forms of relationship and kinds of

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<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note that the conception of the incompleteness of human existence exist since “archaic stages of culture”. As Eliade points out, the primitive man did not consider himself “finished”. To become a man in the proper sense he must die to this first (natural) life and be reborn to a higher life, which is at once religious and cultural” (1987, p. 186,187). This anthropological fact, as we’ve seen, also informs Durkheim’s accounts on the dualism of human nature.

interaction” which “alone produce society as we know it” linking individuals together. Any “fading of the Other” – to use Dufour’s terminology - cannot, in Simmel’s words, erase all “countless minor syntheses” (1950, p. 9) that also constitutes society.

These ‘minor syntheses’, for instance, the fact people look to one another and feel jealous, that they exchange letters, dine together, adorn themselves to be seen, feel grateful to one another etc. – even though not constituting ‘organizations proper’ (Simmel 1950) – they tie individuals together. Hence, any totalizing account of a full fragmentation of meaning when those supra-individual organizations wane is mistaken.

Secondly, Simmel counters the accounts of morality founded upon the imposition of a Law that binds and constrains individuals from the outside, either in the form of the categorical imperative (Kant), the collective fusion (Durkheim) or “the Father/ Other / Subject” (Dufour etc.) .<sup>15</sup>

Alternatively, closer to Bauman and joining the movement in moral thought that aimed to overcome the perceived antagonism between Kantian morality and individual life, Simmel grounds ethical existence in the creative accomplishment of what he sees as ‘the authentic individual life’. The notion reveals Simmel’s theoretical move towards a conviction that moral life cannot be made intelligible without attention to the individual relationship between a person and herself (Lee & Silver 2012: 2, 7).

But even though Simmel asserts the moral vitality of personal life (in a typically vitalist standpoint that contrasts with Durkheim’s perspective), he does not follow, as earlier discussed, the same path tread by most vitalists in its affirmation of the “flows and fluxes of life” against all structure. For instance, if for vitalists such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri and more recently, Antonio Negri, the category of life is considered as desire, a ‘becoming’ pitted against dominant social structures, that is, ‘the symbolic’ (Lash 2005, p. 1), Simmel holds an alternative view. As we have hinted earlier, along with his vitalist views, he embraces the idea of life as a raw material (either natural life or social life) which is necessarily objectified in forms. For insofar as life implies, in itself, the call for “more-than-life” (Lee & Silver 2012), there can never be morality when there is only flow and flux.

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<sup>15</sup> I am referring here to Simmel’s ideas on morality after he had already moved away from the previous approach in which general societal forces were taken as the fundamental basis of morality. Scott Lash (2005) describes Simmel’s theoretical move as evolving from an early positivist to a mid-career neo-Kantian and a late-career vitalist. Yet, he adds, there is evidence of elements of Vitalism *and* positivism in all of Simmel’s work.

Thereby, Simmel breaks free from the confinements of both ‘universal Law’ (wherein a crystallization of external ‘Oughts’ imposed over the individual are foundational to morality) and the opposite pole of “subjectivism” (wherein life as pure intensity and motion, deprived from any limits and objective engagements is asserted). The evasion is possible thanks to his perspective of the self-organizing processes of life into cultural forms, as well as due to his view of society as ‘interaction between individuals’. For Simmel, the social is seen by him in lying half-way between pure individualism and complete collectivism (Joan 2000, p. 71), so that when he thinks of an ‘individualized moral law’ he does not imply a merely subjective decision, based on arbitrary personal preferences. For Simmel what is ‘individual’ is, at one and the same time, subjective *and* trans-individual. As such, to embrace the idea that each individual must have his own categorical ‘ought’ means, in Simmel, that the individual accomplishes it within the intrinsic, irremediable tension between life as pre-individual actuality and form as trans-individual objectivity. So, if the polarity of life as expanding and growing intensity and personal vitality composes Simmel’s own theory of morality, the ‘more-than-life’ need of reaching beyond itself toward forms (arts, politics, morality, religion, economics etc.) that may direct life from above is also part of the same formula (Lee, Silver & Moore 2007). As Lee and Silver put it, Simmel’s “... law of the individual is individual without therefore being purely subjective” (2012, p. 11).

Despite their theoretical divergences and through distinct paths, Simmel and Durkheim offer an outlet to the choice between the search for new totalities which may ‘heal’ meaninglessness and the alternative, over-individualist affirmation of life as independent from forms/cultural synthesis. Yet, the sociologists also overcome radical views of the contemporary epoch as inescapably meaninglessness, leaving any healthy outlet for individuals as some accounts on postmodernity (as those by the scholars discussed above) seem sometimes to suggest.

Now, both Simmel and Durkheim believed that the anomic state of form exhaustion that characterized modernity was “... too paradoxical to be permanent” (Simmel 2000c, p. 90) so that new cultural forms, appropriate to present energies, would emerge soon.

But under the “new servitude of the liberated in the age of total capitalism” - borrowing the words from the title of one of Dufour’s books - renewed attempts are made to deny all forms and ideals outside the ‘pure individual’ and to impose a set of trivial imperatives to a point wherein what prevails, for many of us, is life as a meaningless replication of human’s futility and/or conceit.

Thereby, the analytic exploration of the present socio-cultural and economic forces which are arguably challenging the pursuit of a more well-balanced integration between life/form, individual/society and thus, of meaningfulness, is needed.

I am referring to the challenge imposed by the new transcendent impulse of our contemporary era (which Simmel could not witness but anticipate in his analysis of the centrality of “money as a God” in modern culture) against the creation of a meaningful integration between form and life, fostering instead multiple processes of degradation of forms into commodities, which underlie today’s pathologies of meaninglessness and the linked epidemics of depression, as I shall discuss in some detail in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 8: The money-God of the political-economic theology of neo-liberalism and contemporary crises of meaninglessness**

### **8.1 – Does individualism fuel meaninglessness?**

If once Lukács (1971), with a certain regret, described the modern hero as the one called to create his own version of meaning through the ventures of his individual soul whereas Nietzsche celebrated the novelty, calling out ‘the brave’ for self-creation and active nihilism, contemporary individuals have, in a sense, relinquished the search for either a return to a golden age or a future that would overcome difficulties.

This section will examine the quite controversial view according to which contemporary individualism’ entails a ‘turn inward’ associated with cultural demise and a narcissistic obsession with personal fulfillment leading to ‘collective crises of meaninglessness’.

Among scholars who elaborate on this idea, Christopher Lasch (1991) remarks that if the catastrophes of the twentieth century fed a sense of doom and impending disaster, people today nurse no hopes for a leader or an idea which will open the way towards the future or restore the past.

Rather, after the political upheaval of the sixties and the collective disillusion that follows it, the sense of historical continuity and all great projects for the superation of collective difficulties suffer a strong blow, a condition expressed, in its crudest “... in disaster movies or in fantasies of space travel, which allow vicarious escape from a doomed planet” (Lasch 1991, p. 49).

Less dramatically, the survivalist mentality incarnates in everyday experience wherein in conditions of ample commodification of existence, impulse gratification has been sanctioned as the good life. As a result, life becomes viewed as a kind of “obstacle course” whose aim is to get through “... with a minimum of trouble and pain” (Lasch 1991, p. 49).

A context based on indifference to the past and disconnection from posterity is, in Lasch’s terms, a “therapeutic”, not a religious context. That is, when surviving in the present becomes the main drive to life, the hunger is to establish a personal identity, not to submerge identity in a larger cause (as in any religious mindset). Still, submission to higher loyalties, he writes, “... strike the therapeutic sensibility as intolerably oppressive, offensive to common sense and injurious to personal health and well-being” (1991, p. 13).

Lasch (1991) claims that, in this context, the typical pathology representing the underlying psychological structure of our age is narcissism. Thus, while in Freud's time, he notes, hysteria and obsessional neurosis revealed the traits of an earlier capitalist stage associated with norms such as acquisitiveness, over dedication to work and sexual repression, in the contemporary age, narcissism prevails. Lasch goes on to argue that narcissist types are not only likely to emerge but destined to succeed in "the age of the executive success game" (1991, p. 44). This is a time when previously valuable virtues such as loyalty, capacity for deep attachments and 'individual character' based on convictions and principles, should not stand in the way of a flexible individual continuously open to new ideas and multiple options.

Narcissists seem to be crafted for a time, he continues, when the search for 'personal winning records' surpasses worries with collective aims and even with the accumulation of wealth and goods, and when 'individual achievements' are no longer assessed against an abstract ideal of self-discipline and self-denial but, mainly, against comparison with the achievement of others. Narcissist types will also easily adjust to a context wherein reputation is ultimately referred to one's talent to operate the 'art of seducing' others, managing 'personal impressions' as to craft a 'winning image' which is not necessarily rooted in objective accomplishments.

Finally, a strong 'culture of the image' also triggers narcissist responses, either through the intensified role of 'images of oneself' recorded by cameras, photographs, television etc., or through the emphasis on continuous self-scrutiny or "eternal watchfulness" (Lasch 1991, p. 48) as a means to protect oneself from 'threats' against personal attractiveness.

The American urban sociologist Richard Sennett<sup>16</sup> also identified the narcissist character of modern urban cultures marked by what he sees as the devolution of the public in the city and a hypertrophy of the private sphere. In his thought provoking *The Fall of the Public Man* (1978) Sennett analyzes how in the urban, capitalist, secularized society, "... as gods are demystified, man mystified his own condition" (1978, p. 150). As a result, 'personality' has become a central social category in the public realm and the meaning of everything tends to be narcissistically 'filtered': "... one ceases to believe one's surroundings have any meaning save as a means towards the end of one's own motion" (1978, p. 15).

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<sup>16</sup> Although the two scholars have several points of contact in their interpretation of the narcissist traits of modern / late modern culture, Lasch criticizes some aspects of Sennett's perspective in "The Fall of the Public Man", such as what he understands as the book's political stance, and its devaluation of the personal realm (see Lasch, 1991, pp. 27-30).



For Sennett, a culture deprived of the belief in the public, ruled instead by intimate feeling as a measure of meaning (1978, p. 326) is, ultimately, a culture in distress. For behind all modern “obsession with persons” (1978, p. 4), we are in fact burdened and not liberated, he understands, by the historically engendered belief that social meanings are to stem from individual feelings, as well as by the quite generalized avoidance to fit into any general pattern out of fear of inauthenticity.

The essence of Sennett’s argument is therefore that the withering of public meaning and the alternative measurement of social reality in psychological terms, robs society of its civility, and individuals from a meaningful impersonal life. For people need social barriers in order to exercise their ability to act and to be really expressive beyond empty self-disclosure (1978, p. 264).

Philip Rieff, an author to which both Lasch and Sennett are indebted, depicts the contemporary state of affairs as one wherein all previous cultural consensus of “thou shalt nots” or taboos - which once put into work the classical understanding of culture as the symbolic order which inheres in its prohibitions and remissions - are replaced by the advent and triumph of the ‘therapeutic’ as the new dominant worldview (2006, p. 200).

Rieff interprets the shift as a cultural revolution in which the “social man” mobilized by the language of faith is replaced by the “psychological man” now impelled by a sort of “unreligion” of the “one feels” (2006, p.19). It is therefore, and paradoxically, also a form of “anti-culture” in which all settled convictions, normative institutions and vertical authorities fall under suspicion under the increasingly venerable idea that “... men must free themselves from binding attachments to communal purposes in order to express more freely their individualities” (2006, p. 59).

Like Sennett, Rieff thinks that behind the idea that “we can live freely at last” (2006, p. 4) an unprecedented problem is founded, a problem which he questions if it could ever be resolved. For a culture organized around the motivations of a psychological man is a “culture without cultus” which “in almost all historical cases” he writes, is “a contradiction in terms” (Rieff 2006, p. 11), lacking the sacred socializing agencies and a system of symbolic integration, that is, “salutary beliefs” which organize a life worth living (Rieff 2006, pp. 56-57). Further, being against doctrinal traditions which urge identification with the interests of the community, the therapeutic mindset serves the purposes of anti-politics (Rieff 2006, p. 208).

The accounts of these scholars have been interpreted and criticized by some scholars as pessimistic in its totalizing characterization of the contemporary epoch as

paving the way to social decline or even chaos, blind to anything other than ‘decadence’. Also, these works have often been labeled as ‘conservatives’, mourning past values.<sup>17</sup>

In my opinion, one of the strengths of Lasch’s, Rieff’s and Sennett’s accounts was to highlight the possible extremes of the so-called ‘therapy culture’ leading to psychologization of all moral and social issues and to excessive retraction to ‘the personal’. However, I think that a more ambivalent view of both ‘religious types’ of orientation – which historically entailed ‘meaning’ but also oppression, violence and conformism - and of the so-called ‘therapeutic culture’ of contemporary times is needed.

In a similar line of argument, Katie Wright claims that the extremes of a ‘therapy culture’ fueling a mistaken replacement of social and political solutions by psychological ones should not discredit its emancipatory elements. The author remarks that concerns with psychological well-being have effects beyond the inner lives of individuals. By generating “... a language and legitimacy to claims of oppression, abuse and violence” (Wright 2006, p. 311), the “... therapeutic ethos has provided a vehicle for the exposure of abuse against some of the less powerful groups in society” (Wright 2006, p. 309) enabling social critique and political change.

Charles Taylor is also strongly critical of what he deems as the cultural pessimism of these accounts, arguing that the dark side of individualism, that is, the centering on the self – flattering and narrowing life, making them poor in meaning and less concerned with others or society – although being a verifiable contemporary reality, is not intrinsic to the modern ideal of authenticity, but an effect of its degradation into trivialized and self-indulgent forms (Taylor 1991, p. 15).

When authenticity loses sight of concerns that transcend the self – be they religious, political, historical and aesthetical, the duties of solidarity, or the needs of natural environment (Taylor 1991, p. 22), amongst others – it indulges into forms that

<sup>17</sup> All the scholars mentioned, perhaps anticipating criticisms against their ideas, have something to say in this regard. Philip Rieff, despite his strong doubts about the possible validity of the contemporary (anti) culture of the “psychological man”, is willing to entertain the idea that the foundation of civilization on ‘psychic well being’ might work. He explicitly states that his ideas are not meant to be a defense of the “unconscious conscience” based on “classical internalizations of authority”, but instead an indication that “... the initial cost of modern cultural revolution has been a feeling of symbolic impoverishment” (Rieff 2006, p. 207). Richard Sennett, asserting the insightfulness of “... an empathy for the past”, warns that by describing the picture of the fall of the public culture, he does not want to evoke a feeling of regret which induces paralyzing resignation about the present (Sennett 1978, p. 259). Christopher Lasch, similarly, remarks that “...current critical dogma equates every such reference to the past as itself an expression of nostalgia”. Countering this perspective, he argues: “the belief that in some ways the past was a happier time by no means rests on a sentimental illusion; nor does it lead to a backward-looking, reactionary paralysis of the political will” (Lasch 1991, xvii).

compromise the justification of authenticity as an ideal, he claims. If feelings and subjectivity were supposed to determine the meaning of things outside any horizon of significance, there would be no reason why one should believe that authenticity itself is a valid ideal. This is so because in the subjectivist rationale it would depend on how one feels about authenticity, which can obviously vary (Taylor 1991, p. 39).

As hinted earlier, the intrinsic problem of the ideal of authenticity is, Taylor admits, the idea of originality embedded in it, according to which we have to discover what is to be ourselves - by making or expressing it - outside the network of pre-existing models. The expressivism of modern individualism is at center stage here: "We discover what we have it in us to be by becoming that mode of life, by giving expression in our speech and action to what is original in us" (Taylor 1991, p. 61). However, he goes on to argue, while authenticity involves creation and frequently opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what is collectively recognized as 'morality', it also requires openness to horizons of significance and a self-definition in dialogue which is, ultimately, social (1991, p. 66). For instance, 'self-choice', an important aspect of authenticity, cannot have any sense whatsoever if it lacks reference to a horizon of significance beyond choice. Otherwise, he writes, "... what would be the value of self-choosing instead of doing whatever one pleases? (1991, p. 39).

That is, we are not merely 'liberated' to choose. Rather, we are required to realize the virtues embedded within the ideal of authenticity, such as self-choice, self-respect, courage (rather than conformism), independence rather than heteronomy etc.: horizons are given.

In sum, and contrarily to the view of those labeled "cultural pessimists", Taylor sees a strong moral ideal behind self-fulfillment, since 'being true to oneself' necessarily entails reference to a non-chosen framework of values and ideals.

Alain Ehrenberg will also criticize the line of thought of Lasch, Rieff and Sennett. Now, to be sure, Ehrenberg deals with many of the themes that occupied these writers. He opens discussion with these accounts in its emphasis on the decline of the public domain and the weakening / dissolution of social ties. For this constitutes a sociological thinking, he claims, marked by nostalgia for the past and based on what he considers a great misunderstanding: that contemporary individualism is equivalent to social dissolution (Ehrenberg 2013).

Conversely, Ehrenberg argues that lacking a pre-defined societal place to occupy as dictated by the Gods, Masters or Fathers, contemporary individualism emerges as a new social form which institutes itself over the wreckage of all tradition and foundation.

Two historical “waves of emancipation” bring about the new societal model: first, around the sixties, the wave of the revolt of the private individual towards personal liberation, and more recently, the second wave, that of personal initiative and submission to the norms of performance (2010b, p. 227).

The move – which he analyzes, specifically, in the French context- is therefore from a hierarchical model based on discipline to a model based on self-reference which fundamentally changes the relationship with inequality. The change refers to the replacement of the emphasis on social protection to the obligation of being autonomous as a new social exigency, that is, the democratization of the idea that anyone could be exceptional once they are given the means for acting by themselves (Ehrenberg 2007, 2010a, 2010b). A radicalism of subjectivity is thus evoked and individual autonomy, psychic liberation and personal initiative, he states, become not merely private choices but the new laws projected as social demands (2010a, p. 74). For if the individual does not fulfill the demands of autonomy and initiative, “... a common rule valid for all” social exclusion is “... the threat for possible offenders” (Ehrenberg 2010b, p. 8).

The new supreme value of autonomy, the feeling that you have to be the author of your own choices in many levels of life and the linked retreat of political modes of social protection, he admits, feeds personal insecurity. But this, he goes on to say, constitutes a new social ideal, one which may weight over people that feel they can’t measure up to such a limitless responsibility. As such, people’s insecurity is not a signal of lack of ideals. In other words, when autonomy dominates the concept of society, people are not asking “What should I do?” but rather, they start questioning themselves: “Am I able to do it?” (Ehrenberg 2007, pp. 130-131).

Contemporary individualism, therefore, does not unleash the atomistic degradation of social ties but rather, it is socially embedded. To substantiate the argument, Ehrenberg builds on Tocqueville and Dumont to claim, firstly, that individualism does not exclude but encompasses its polar opposite, holism; secondly, that the struggle against the destructive side of individualism is an intrinsic feature of the social body in democratic times (Ehrenberg 2007; 2010c). In his words, the “...slackening of social links is a natural feature of democratic society and not an evil that destroys it inexorably” (Ehrenberg 2013, p. 21).

Besides, whereas individualism implies that values of interdependency become hierarchically subordinated to independence, they are not absent; and could not be, he remarks, since life in common is part of the human condition (Ehrenberg 2010c, p. 9). Yet, if interdependency collapses, so would individualism: individuals can only be equal

and autonomous when the interaction between them is somehow subordinated (Ehrenberg 2013, pp. 21-22).

Thereby, he claims, when advocates of ‘social decline’ associate the emphasis on the personal inherent to contemporary individualism with the privatization and psychologization of reality they stage an “individualistic sociology” based on a mistaken dichotomization between individual and society. Leaving aside this artificial separation, the fact that the personal gains prominence over the public can be seen as a new social form and not as a condition that leads to the dissolution of society projected on the breakdown of communities, the collapse of politics and so on (Ehrenberg 2013).

Finally, Ehrenberg also counters the idea that this new social form condemns individuals to pathology (and that narcissism is thus the price to pay for the disassembling of community as some accounts imply). Even though a new collective psychology results from contemporary transformations, he states, “... the subject does not emerge from this process moribund, just changed” (2010b, p.192)

The important question which Ehrenberg seems thus to be raising is: are we pathologizing (as something against individual and society) what in reality is only the structurally inherent condition of individualist democracies?

The question reminds me of Durkheim’s refusal,<sup>18</sup> as we’ve seen earlier, to conceive individualism as a form of antagonism between individual and society and thus, as something that would inescapably lead to social decline.

However, Durkheim had a very specific kind of individualism in mind when he submitted his idea of the “religion of humanity” as a social institution. And this is certainly not the same kind of contemporary individualism of “the pure individual” as Ehrenberg himself describes: an individual which has to govern himself, finding the orientations for his existence in himself alone (2010a, p. 11).

Before going into the details of this distinction, I would like to underline that in my opinion, Ehrenberg illuminates two important issues that should impact the way by which the theme of “meaninglessness” is to be understood under contemporary conditions. First, the issue – as discussed in the previous chapter - of the supposed dismantling of society after all absolute reference becomes contested. For him, this view is profoundly mistaken. Rather, social norms are not disappearing but shifting as a response to new emergent genres of social interaction. Secondly, his ideas go against the tide of “the mourning paradigm” calling attention to the obvious, but often neglected fact that, be as it may, the majority of us do not want to return to the previous disciplinary

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<sup>18</sup> Ehrenberg seems to suggest the affinity of his argument with Durkheim’s perspective (see Ehrenberg 2013, p. 21).

stranglehold wherein meanings were relatively given. In his words, "... instead of pitting ourselves for the suffering that surrounds us, it is time to face, with some historical appreciation and good sense, the question of emancipation" (Ehrenberg 2010b, p. 7).

For this to become a reality, he claims, contemporary individualism should be seen less as the triumph of egoism over civic spirit and more as a transformation in the way we experience the world. Yet, political references, modes of public action and institutions should not be seen as having collapsed, but rather, as having significantly changed. Within the new sociality of autonomy, institutions and politics are now organized according to the ideal that "... each citizen has to be in an environment which leads him to be the principal agent of his action" (Ehrenberg 2007, p. 133).

Ehrenberg's political stance of going beyond what he calls "... the endless game-of-mirrors of liberal versus anti-liberal" (2010c, p. 7) also seems sensible and possibly fecund, although the idea needs further elaboration.

I do agree with Ehrenberg that social norms are nowadays changed rather than absent, and also that focusing on the present is a much more productive intellectual (and political) task than the critique of it in a spirit of more or less implicit yearning for an impossible return to the canons of disciplinary law.

What he seems to leave unfocused, however, is that the contemporary ideal of the "pure individual" obliged to be autonomous and independent of any conditions outside himself, does not merely constitutes "... the egalitarian dream of today" (Ehrenberg 2010a, p. 72) triggered by the historical loss of transcendental criteria to say 'what we are' and 'what we should be' (Ehrenberg 2010a, p. 74). Alternatively, the 'pure individual' he describes is, in many senses, the ideal subject of the present stage of deregulated capitalism.

I am not saying that Ehrenberg is not aware of this relationship. In his book *The Cult of Performance* (2010a) he insightfully explores the historical development of notions of autonomy and self-management within the corporate environment, explaining how these notions become simultaneously the expression of collective aspiration of populations *and* a functional exigency that provides efficiency to the management of organizations (or even societies) in an unstable context (Ehrenberg 2010a, p. 43).

However, as Petersen notes, "He is not interested in capitalism per se. He is rather, as Zygmunt Bauman calls him '... an indefatigable explorer of contemporary mutations of modern individualism' " (Petersen 2009, p. 64). Hence, the economic capitalist context underlying the process by which values associated with autonomy have

been generalized - as pseudo-autonomy and pseudo-responsibility (Petersen & Willig 2004) - is left relatively unexplored, which shortens, I think, the breadth of his argument.

In other words, while I agree with him that the rise of individualism *per se* is not in itself the equivalent to the decline of society (and consequent meaninglessness), the new cult of the 'pure individual' is to be recognized as being deeply and problematically implicated within the broader transcendence of money as God and market fundamentalism as the political-economic theology of neo-liberalism. For "... a society that makes of interindividual concurrence a just competition" (Ehrenberg 2010a, p.13) is clearly working under the principles of this new theology. Likewise, if it is true, as he puts it, that the "... meritocratic virus ... has become the ideal of everyone" (Ehrenberg 2010a, p. 69) this is a virus that, while making many of us sick from excessive responsibility, is a remedy for keeping the system's health.

The consequences of this implication over the fate of contemporary individualism are certainly wide. Under the rule of the money-God, the natural hierarchical balance between interdependency and independence of individualism has been disrupted to the benefit of the later. This is, in fact, a bland way of putting things; in the new theological neoliberal rationale, egoism is to a large extent erected as a rule of life, even in the puritan guise of private or abstract interest: "... private vices, that is, private interests should have a free hand, because they lead to public happiness. *Amor sui* is the main road to glory" (Bergh 2013, p. 88). Still, in a context of the "divine market" (Dufour, 2009) independence itself is often just marketing bait for captivating consumers which 'freely' adopt massified behaviors while believing to be independent.

The question which therefore remains is: are we really acquiring skills to act on our own, as Ehrenberg (2007, p. 133) defines as being the fundamental ideal underlying contemporary institutions? Or are we, under the aegis of the rationality of commodities, exactly shrinking in our ability to reflect and act whereas a new transcendence of performance and, paradoxically, self-indulgence and limitless enjoyment (institutionalized as entertainment) advances? Putting it differently: in what sense are we living in a social environment where all individuals can be the entrepreneur of their own lives when our purported "autonomous actions" become either an expectation of limitless efficacy or a camouflage of the new imperative of enjoyment?

In such a context, the Nietzschean 'sovereign man' is not (as Ehrenberg seems to suggest) the new social norm, unless in a totally perverted way – incarnated in the social promotion of the Sadean 'isolist' - a combination of hedonist and egoistic forms of existence (Bergh 2013, p. 88) - or in the pseudo-autonomy characteristic of the

meritocratic universe of the neoliberal ideal of the ‘pure individual’. Both forms, I risk to say, Nietzsche himself would label as fundamentalist and therefore nihilistic. After the decline of ‘metaphysical categories of meaning’, we still don’t live beyond transcendence as Nietzsche had imagined. Rather, a ‘sacralization of the profane’ has been imposing itself, a new fundamentalism manifested in the liberal ‘normative autonomy’ and, also, in the ‘hedonist creed’ of consumerist Western societies.

Still, even considering the plausibility of Ehrenberg’s warnings that contemporary individualism is not to be seen as leading to the decline of social ideals, the generalized contemporary ‘religion of the money-God’ – which I shall define in this chapter – incorporates ‘individualism’ as a tool for its reproduction, draining its worth as a social ideal. Further, I will argue, it also tends to dissolve those ends, ideals and societal values which ‘protect’ social ties but may clash with the rationality of money.

Ehrenberg himself, quoting Tocqueville, notes that American democracy fights individualism with institutions whose goal “... is to multiply, to infinity, for citizens, occasions to act in common, and to make them feel everyday they depend on each other” (Tocqueville, cited in Ehrenberg 2007, p. 132). But inasmuch as the new political-economic theology has been condemning ‘as heresy’ everything which, being at odds with the neutral rationality of the divine-money threats to inhibit its logics, social ties seem often under pressure. In addition, we are constantly invited to ‘egoism’ (not individualism or autonomy) as, purportedly, the best way to value our own interests.

Hence, the dismantling of social order seems to be less an implicit outcome of individualism than an effect of pragmatic principles inherent to the money rationality which, acquiring supreme value, has been increasingly converting social ideals and the intrinsic worth of things into cash value.

In sum, our difficulties do not seem to stem from the acceleration of individualization processes taken in isolation but from the dissemination of a new form of the ‘Absolute’ which has to be described and analyzed if we are to understand the intricacies of contemporary individualism and thus, going back to Ehrenberg’s terminology, “face the fact of emancipation”.

By saying this, I am leaving aside the philosophically complex discussion on the possibilities of emancipation and autonomy to be ever realized. Conversely, I am taking emancipation here - as I think Ehrenberg also implies in this passage - as the realized condition of contemporary individuals which are liberated/emancipated from the yoke of a transcendent meaning (dictated by sovereigns and masters to which they obeyed) having now to be sovereign themselves. But emancipation cannot be faced if we are



merely replacing one yoke with another: from a religious, traditional or political subjection to a new, but equally largely uncontested dominion of a new transcendent Law which enslaves and commands while incorporating individualism as a good fuel for keeping the commodities cycle running fast and well and thus, transfiguring it as "... the most radical repudiation of individuality" (Lasch 1991, p. 70).

In the following lines, I attempt to develop this issue, analyzing how autonomy as the new neoliberal ideal interplays with the collective crisis of meaninglessness in a context wherein, far from being liberated and autonomous, people are now been invited to 'serve' under the auspices of the money-God.

## **8.2 - Autonomy in the new spirit of capitalism**

Beyond the senseless nostalgia for an impossible and, for most of us, unwanted return to the past, and the empirical denial of an excessively gloomy picture of our contemporary era as a time lacking any outlets for meaningfulness, the phenomenology of contemporary life suggests that autonomy has grown wide.

Thus, if one interprets autonomy either as predominantly a sign of an anti-culture motivated only by the anarchy of impulse release leading to social disintegration or, as Ehrenberg says, as a sign of a new societal model which now has notions such as 'release', 'initiative' and 'action' as the new basis for novel social forms of restriction and enthusiasm, the consensual fact seems to be that autonomy has acquired a very specific shape in contemporary conditions.

And if a more complete realization of individual's rights and the refinement of his ability to reflect and act are (hopefully) part of this story, autonomy has also developed into a consecration of individuality in a way that is certainly very distinct from the Durkheimian notion of "the cult of the individual".

Ehrenberg describes the shift as a process in which following the Enlightenment, Romantic aspirations, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and others, the notion of a sovereign individual becomes fulfilled, not in its critical design towards emancipation of humans from the webs of dependency and enforcement as in the early times of modernity, neither against the oppressing forces of progress and rationalization for the sake of singularity, as in romantic and existentialist projects, but as a norm. For the new 'sacred individual' has now lost all sense of critical demands and romantic utopias (Ehrenberg 2010a).

Hence, whereas Durkheim's (1976) definition of 'individual' inheres in the submission of individuality to something greater (a higher social ideal) as to find meaning, the ideal individual of contemporary individualism – powerfully motivated by

neoliberal ‘dogmas’ - is, rather, the embodiment of the isolated being dependent on neither roots, nor past: a pure individuality which refers to nothing but to itself (Ehrenberg 2010a, p. 25, p. 54).

The Kantian and Rousseauian moral formula based on the disregard for what concerns one personally for the sake of shared goals (underlying Durkheim’s notion of individualism as a social institution) is thereby inverted. Still, even the Simmelian perspective of the life-form dialectics (which enlarges the role of individuality on the constitution of a moral life while maintaining the role of limits and cultural forms) does not find realization in such a model. For the ‘ideal individual’ is pure exactly because he is independent of anything that goes beyond him, such as collective filiations, tradition, cultural forms, the heritages of name and any notion of ‘a general individual’. He is a “being of beginnings” (Ehrenberg 2010a, p. 67) and thus, there where he is unique and supposedly unbound to anything existing before or outside himself, the ideal ‘pure individual’ of neo-liberalism finds his fullness.

For Dufour, individualism has suffered an inversion: whereas formerly it was realized within the symbolic order of society, now it develops upon indifference to the existence of principles which transcend individuals as pure expressions of their private selves. This bespeaks, he claims, that the propagated idea that we suffer in Western societies from the excesses of modern individualism is mistaken. Rather, societies are suffering from a corrupted “pos-individualist” form of life marked by the chief fundament of the liberal ideology: “egoism” (Dufour 2009, p. 22, *my transl.*).

In a way very consistent with Durkheim’s thesis (1973, pp. 54-56), Dufour claims that ‘egoism’ does not originate as a result of natural developments of individualism leading to social dissolution. It arises instead from the collapse of a “high-quality individualism”, which is not the enemy of rules and laws but instead is fundamentally dependent on them, being also based on a demanding critical ascetism.<sup>19</sup>

What is happening in the contemporary era, according to Dufour (2009), is that individualism has been degraded into a deinstitutionalized, liberalized, uncritical egoistic form, based on contempt for everything that transcends individuality – collective instances such as institutions and the state – and extending to ‘society’ as such.

According to Dufour (2011), this shift occurs by way of the mutations in capitalism in which all forms of exchange and institutions that have survived by reference to some transcendental values are being devalued under the weight of the

<sup>19</sup> Dufour’s ‘high-quality individualism’ clearly corresponds to Durkheim’s ‘moral individualism’. An evident sign of this is the fact that both scholars refer to and elaborate on Rousseau’s and Kant’s definition of autonomy in order to argue for the legitimacy of an individualism which is the opposite of egoism.

“antiauthoritarian totalitarianism” (Dufour 2011, p. 14) of the neutral monetary value of commodities.

In *The Art of Shrinking Heads* (2008), as discussed previously, Dufour’s focus lies mainly on a psychoanalytic inspired interpretation of the emerging forms of subjectification generated by the collapse of Subjects – that is, of unifying, collective principles which, historically, have been losing prestige and are further disarticulated under the rule of the new laws of commodity exchange.

It is in his following works, *The Divine Market* (2009) and *The Perverse City* (2013) that the author explicitly argues and develops the idea that if the figures of the Other are now losing prestige, we are not living in a kind of ‘remission time’ wherein religion totally collapses. In other words, the present-day lack of symbolic subjection to grand enunciators holding a collective reach does not really bring about the ‘twilight of the idols’.

Conversely – diverging from Rieff, Lasch and even ‘correcting’ his previous perspective<sup>20</sup> - a new religion has been installing itself and with it, a new idol emerges. Dufour (2009) calls that the “divine market”.

Hence, if something is collapsing today, he claims, it is not religion but the modern transcendental project in its various philosophical forms: the Kantian ‘clear reason’, the Rousseauian idea of “the collective individual” as the guarantor of freedom, Hegel’s view of the state as “the reality of the concrete liberty” and so on. Meanwhile, religion returns through the widespread faith in the market’s providence (Dufour 2009, p. 99, p. 132).

As we’ve seen above, Kehl (2009a) argues in similar lines. For her, the members of contemporary Western societies have faith in the symbolic coin that governs their lives – the capitalist mandate which has been continuously commanding us to enjoy, to self-develop and to be sovereign of ourselves. Still, and very often, she adds, they despair when feeling unable to pay this symbolic debt.

As I have already hinted, I build upon this idea. Contemporary individuals are suffering less by the lack of imperatives and more by being under the yoke of a new form of (political-economic) transcendence which, paradoxically, fuels formlessness and egoism.

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<sup>20</sup> In his book *The Divine Market* (2009) Dufour explicitly declares that his earlier perspective on the “decline of the Other” is insufficient. However being a good way of describing the current state of affairs in Western civilizations, he writes, it does not address the complexity of a contemporary situation in which - as I will also argue below - there is simultaneously decline and change for a very new kind of “Other” which is necessary to define (Dufour 2009, p. 85).

Thus, contemporary emerging forms of individualization and the new “galaxy of autonomy” (Ehrenberg, 2010a) can only be adequately understood in its intricacies and effects, I think, by recognizing the fact that the historical development of individualism has been profoundly intertwined with economic developments.

This association can be understood, as Honneth (2004) submits, as the unintended result of a chain of various processes on material, social, intellectual and economic levels which, gathering in the manner of an elective affinity, were able to create, in conjunction, a new kind of individualism. Alternatively, rather than an unintended consequence and elective affinity, contemporary individualism and the forms of self-realization linked to it can be seen as the causal effect of processes of a relatively deliberate incorporation of individualist claims by the “new spirit of capitalism”, as in Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s (2002, 2005) accounts.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), following Max Weber, argue that since capitalism is in itself amoral, it needs to borrow a critical spirit from the outside in order to justify individual commitment to it. In their words: “Unable to discover a moral basis in the logic of the insatiable accumulation process (which in itself, on its own, is amoral) capitalism must borrow the legitimating principles it lacks from orders of justification external to it” (2005, p. 487).

But these scholars also fundamentally diverge from Weber (2008) who, as has been discussed earlier in this thesis, envisaged a whole disenchantment of capitalism before the general escalation of rationalization. In contrast, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue that capitalism proved itself to be robust enough to make use of critical elements external to itself in order to thrive as a system.

The “new spirit of capitalism” emerging in the 1970’s has thrived, they explain, upon a specific incorporation and metabolization of the emergent criticism of the sixties and seventies derived from intellectual and artistic circles, which they term “artistic critique”. In Boltanski & Chiapello words, the artistic critique foregrounds “... the loss of meaning and, in particular, the loss of the sense of what is beautiful and valuable which derives from standardization and generalized commodification, affecting not only everyday objects but also artworks (the cultural mercantilism of the bourgeoisie) and human beings” opposing this with “... the freedom of artists, their rejection of any contamination of aesthetics by ethics, their refusal of any form of subjection in time and space and, in its extreme forms, of any kind of work” (2005, p. 38).

Placing these demands within the wider historical process we’ve been analyzing in the thesis, it is worth noting that the artistic critique’s intellectual foundations route

back to the Romantic Movement, but it was also an heir of Marx's ideas on alienation and oppression (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005, p. 52). More recently, it incarnates in the 1960s and 1970s 'counter culture' through variegated cultural movements which, as we have discussed above, shared a 'liberation discourse' and proclaim values such as individual spontaneity, uniqueness and authenticity.

But capitalism, they go on to argue, capitalized on the normative standards imbued in these criticisms, endogenizing them as part of its own legitimation and thus reinventing its otherwise outdated "spirit". Doing so, capitalism fills the "... gap between the actual forms of accumulation and the normative conceptions of social order" (Boltanski & Chiapello 2002, p. 3) and thus, justifies participation.

But while the economic system acquires a new legitimating morality, and more yet, an ideology - which functions as a hindrance towards thinking of alternative systems - by the same token, self-realization claims embedded in the 'artistic critique' become altered, organized and finally imposed onto individuals as institutionalized norms (Honneth 2004, p. 467). That is, what once was an ideal (against capitalism) becomes institutionalized as a justification for the system itself, helping to disorientate all critical activity (Boltanski & Chiapello 2002) and somehow undoing the worth and strength of ideals. Thereafter, 'critique' is incorporated as the very fuel of capitalism.

The protagonists of the so-called artistic critique and all those who in the sixties dreamt to defeat capitalism through the rejection of all forms of authority, institutions and constraints to freedom found out that they could only fulfil demands of radical, total liberation from all constraints *within* capitalism. In Boltanski and Chiapello words, "... the critique of oppression can gently lead... towards acceptance – at least tacitly – of liberalism" (2005, p. 39).

What it is notably clear is that the "norms of authentic self-realization" (Petersen 2011) as they are today understood, corresponds to a new "regime of the self" (Rose 1999) which successfully addresses the needs of an economic system based on deregulation and deinstitutionalization.

That is, whereas processes such as de-nationalization of publicly owned enterprises; minimization of rigidities in the labour market etc. are some of the structural conditions (Rose 1999, p.144) needed by the neo-liberal system (Honneth & Hartmann 2006), the corresponding subjective conditions for an effective neoliberal undertaking are reflected in a new 'subjectivity-type'. The latter is structured, in Ehrenberg's words, less around "... disciplinary obedience than to personal decision and initiative" (2010b, p. 8),

virtues that have become central for the reproduction of the economic system in contemporary conditions.

The process is particularly visible in the sphere of work. Since the 1980s - in a time when hierarchy and bureaucracy was being rejected and seen as "...the eternal threats to freedom most recently incarnated in Nazism" (Rose 1999, p. 138) and, more concretely, due to technological mutations, economic instability and the globalization of markets (Ehrenberg 2010a, p. 91), Fordist type arrangements of labour have fallen to more individualised types.

Whereas in a context of stable markets, bureaucracy allowed the obtainment of an internal equilibrium, contemporary instability called for a new discipline of personal engagement and implication. Previous hierarchic views based on the "mystics of the boss" leave way to forms of management based on participation. The responsible, autonomous worker arises as the new ideal: no longer expected to passively obey commands and rules, but, on the contrary, to be able to act as if there was no one hierarchically superior to him to indicate the way forward (Ehrenberg 2010a, p. 89).

In such a context, new management conceptions and practices stressed the values of creativity, authenticity and self-realization in work, implementing thus the core ideas of the artistic critique (Petersen 2009, p. 60).

Now, if *prima facie*, these changes seemingly provide the opportunity for individualisation and self-realization as had been previously demanded by workers, when individuals are required to be authentic human beings while being at the same time a productive, competitive employee, they have no choice but to instrumentalize their self-realization as a "competitive trademark" (Petersen 2009, p. 62). Hence, when the investment of personal values and emotions becomes one of the prime motors of contemporary capitalism, the boundaries between, on one side, the sphere of authenticity and, on the other, employability, become blurred. In such a context, "...Authentic self-realization is viewed as something that can be *moulded* in order to enhance subjective performances and function as a company aid for constant economic progress" (Petersen 2009, p. 62).

After all, one can be autonomous, creative, enterprising, and motivated - in a word, authentic - in the highest degree possible, but these virtues won't have any social value if the company's targets are not met. In such a context, what is at stake is less to 'become oneself' and more a pseudo-autonomy and pseudo-responsibility under which lies the need to follow the requirements of productivity and the exposure of individuals to constant efficiency tests (Petersen & Willig 2004, p. 342).

Beyond the work sphere, media and advertisements also capitalize on individuals' desires and emotions to a point at which the borders between the 'authentic self' and its spectacularization through artificial personal-styles, forms of expression and thinking become blurred.

Far from self-determination, choice, uniqueness and ability to reflect independently, the conflation between the self and market goals entails the recruitment of individuals in massified groups. Again, this is done on the basis of the idea that products, services and images are tools to be used by free individuals in search of realizing their desires, actualize their choices and express their uniqueness. But the extremely deliberate strategies of market and its calculable effects on the behavior of purportedly unique individuals suggests another story.

Historically, the capitalization of individual desires and emotions also stemmed from capitalism's capacity to reinvent itself. After the 1929 crisis of super-production, capitalism did not collapse. Rather, the capitalist moral which once, as Weber (2008 [1904]) shows, was borrowed from the Protestant doctrine of work and production without fruition, was replaced by a new moral of the adoration of the capital as a means to fruition, to happiness and pleasure. This constitutes a move, in Dufour's words, from the "proletarianization of workers" to the "proletarianization of consumers" (Dufour 2009, p. 36). In such a context of intense 'reproduction of the same' the idea of an autonomous individual - who thinks and talks in his own name - sounds empty.

I agree therefore with Lasch when he claims that the devastation of personal life and not its promotion (which would include the social condition of human beings as a concern) that must be criticized and challenged. For not only moral individualism, as Durkheim once described, but even 'authenticity' gets transfigured as a sacred totem of the larger and more prominent cult of neo-liberalism. In this regard, I draw on Dufour's wise warning about the danger to confuse "...escaping our symbolic subjection by rising above it with escaping it by debasing ourselves" (Dufour 2008, p. 44).

For the 'liberated' contemporary individual, becoming a slave to his passions and compulsions, to objects, self-image (Dufour 2012) and yet, to new social ideals of normative action and autonomy that suits to the system's reproduction, has been dissolving into a byproduct of the new theology of neo-liberalism.

### 8.3 -The new religion of the money-God and crises of meaninglessness

If significant transformations affected the ‘new spirit of capitalism’, the ascendancy of money as a God is not a new historical trend. For sure, all the founding fathers of sociology were, in one way or another, intellectually concerned with the effects of the liberal economy on both individual and societal processes.

Durkheim himself, in his early *Suicide* (1951) was already concerned with the phenomenon of the deregulation of industrial relations wherein government becomes “... the tool and servant” of economy. Anticipating what, presently, is a pervasive reality, Durkheim states, “... industry, instead of being still regarded as a means to an end transcending itself, has become the supreme aim of individuals and societies alike. Thereupon the appetites thus excited have become freed of any limiting authority... Their restraint seems like a sort of sacrilege” (1951, p. 255). Georg Simmel was also certainly aware of the sacredness of economic materialism in a modern era when all objects tended to be appreciated first and foremost to the extent to which they cost money while all qualitative references of value tended to decline (Simmel 2005)

Indeed, in parallel to Kant’s ideas on the transcendental universal duties, the new modern economy of money was being heralded in Adam Smith’s writings, promoting, Dufour (2009) notes, the opposite idea: the possibility of evading all transcendental principles, aligning moral and human exchanges with the immanent rules of ‘science’ and promoting the pursuit of egoism (2009, p. 86) as the natural path to build the wealth of nations<sup>21</sup>.

In any case, the ‘natural movement’ from self-interest towards the realization of collective interests would be explained through recourse to the magical. In Adam Smith’s famous formulation, this natural movement is possible thanks to the “occult spirit” and the “invisible hand” of the market which favors public aims by drawing together the

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<sup>21</sup> Some scholars of Adam Smith’s work describe as caricatured the interpretation of Smith as an advocate of egoism and greed in a context of absolute ‘laissez-faire’ (Chomsky 1995; Evensky 1993; Santos & Bianchi 2007; Wight 2005). Noam Chomsky (1995), for instance, argues that a minimally thorough reading of *The Wealth of Nations* shows that while Smith does argue for free markets as a means to the social order, for him – revealing his intellectual heritage as an Enlightenment thinker – equality of conditions (and not merely opportunity) is what should be aimed at. According to Chomsky, Smith even denounced a state whose “... the principal architects of policy are ‘the merchants and manufacturers’” who work for their own interests “... no matter of the effect on others” (Chomsky 1995 n.p). However, Chomsky (1995) himself points out that the proponents of the free market economics carefully crafted an ‘Adam Smith myth’ making him much more consistent with neo-liberalism than his ideas actually concede.



desires and private interests of countless private individuals (Friedman & Friedman 1980, p. 14).

The transcendent flavor of Smith's 'project' seems clear: individuals should dedicate themselves to their own conservation and prosperity, while the market's natural forces - as those of an omnipotent and omniscient God more powerful and trustworthy than all mundane and fallible interventions - advances society's interests and creates the maximum benefits for all. In this respect, Dufour (2009) claims that while Kant wanted to find a regulating principle (the categorical imperative), Smith advocated deregulation so that the 'divine design' could be fulfilled (2009, p. 115).

Smith's religious worldview has been analyzed as essential to his ideas, especially his conversion to "Deism" (Denis 2005). Deism is a religious view which, gaining prominence during the Age of the Enlightenment, embodies the historical "... paradigm shift from Religion to Science, from a divinely ordered cosmos to a Natural order" (Keohane & Kuhling 2014). Classical deists of the time believed in God no longer as the transcendental Father that constrains human beings to follow his moral rules, but as a law of Nature, a transcendent reality which unfolds independently of human actions and can only be known via reason and the correct observation of nature (Keohane & Kuhling 2014).

From Smith until today, all the 'apostles and priests'<sup>22</sup> of the market-God theology conceived the market as a strictly natural reality above and beyond the artificial, lower fictions of this world; a factual order to which all humanity should humbly and fearlessly surrender, never trying to oppose or command this order with laws and institutions, interfering with the 'natural' health of things.

The supposedly natural, self-regulating character of neo-liberalism is, for instance, explicitly declared by Milton Friedman, "the grand guru of the movement for unfettered capitalism" (Klein 2001, p. 4). In his words: "Positive economics is in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgment" (Friedman 1984, p. 211).

Frank Knight, one of the founders of Chicago School economics, advocated the idea that each economic theory of the school is "... a sacred feature of the system not a debatable hypothesis". For economic forces, he suggests, self-equilibrate like all natural

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<sup>22</sup> The terms are not only metaphorical. For instance, the Chicago School's economist Arnold Harberger described himself as a "seriously dedicated missionary" (Klein 2001, p. 61) while Alan Greenspan, once chairman of the U.S Federal Reserve admitted, after the recent 2008 economic depression, to be into "... a state of shocked disbelief" (Sandel 2012, p. 12).

forces: "... supply communicating with demand the way the moon pulls the tides" (Klein 2001, p. 50).

The new Providence, therefore, does not rule by moral commandments but through purely immanent laws to be followed, natural laws not contingent on beliefs, customs or traditions but established instead by the understanding and application of 'things as they are'. That's a Providence of the 'fundamental', ruled by 'absolutely natural', undisputable laws, purportedly independent of any 'transcendentals'.

The moment in which German transcendentalism – even in its more recent versions of Neokantianism or the Harbermasian perspectives - loses force and leaves way to English liberalism in its contemporary, ultraliberal form, can be dated on the 1980 decade. The 'feat' was historically epitomized in Reagan's and Thatcher's instauration of deregulated economic liberty, firing a 'great shot' over the social pact between individuals (Dufour 2012). Thatcher's widely famous statement - "There is no such a thing as society" – epitomizes the shift.

As Rose notes, in this period, "... neo-liberalism took as its target not just an economy but society itself. All kinds of practices - health, security, welfare and more were to be restructured according to a particular image of the economic - the market" (Rose 1999, p. 146).

Increasingly, market and market-like practices are thus extending their reach to almost every sphere of life. And while modernity created some resistance to it through coexistent, concurrent ideals and "the effort to make commodities transcend itself" (Jameson 1991, x), the contemporary epoch witnesses an immense dilatation of the commodity sphere wherein in Jameson's words, "culture has become a product in its own right" (1991, x) so that the money-God can reign supreme.

The order of meaning has traced therefore a full cycle: those prior times when a transcendent realm was the sole and supreme sphere to which everything should return as to securely find meaning (far above all the mundane decisions of these 'fallible', 'errand' and 'sinful' human beings) are now, in new guises, back with us.

What is to become of modern society, Weber asks at the conclusion of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, "When the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt?" One possibility he suggests is a 'great rebirth of religion', so that, perhaps, "at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise" (2008, p. 124). So far, we find his prediction realized in the religion of money as God, proclaimed by the 'new prophets' of market fundamentalism as political-economic theology.

The 'religious resurrection' would probably not surprise Durkheim either (Keohane & Kuhling 2014). In reality, he is well known for having asserted the anthropological nature of religion and its consequent perpetuation in different forms. The religious nature of man, Durkheim says, "... is an essential and permanent aspect of humanity" (1976, p. 3). Similarly, Carl Schmitt (1986) claims that if God can be done away with as "the ultimate, absolute authority", his structural position remains embodied in new worldly factors, upon which order and meaning can be restored. More recently, Dufour reinforces the idea. In his suggestive words: "God is, in effect, a phoenix that does not cease to reborn from its ashes under different avatars" (2009, p. 85, *my transl.*).

In present conditions, for sure, there is no longer space for the 'religious God' as the 'city's ruler', nor to the modern ambition to eliminate all obscurity from the 'natural' and 'human' worlds. The 'religion of the money-God' is born exactly when the subject finds himself free from all submission to previous metaphysical authorities, collective enunciators, 'Fathers' that once legitimated history.

Nevertheless, He acts not only by taking advantage of the historical upheaval of traditional values and ideals. Reinforcing the theological analogy, the new divinity is (to a certain extent at least) a Creator. Fundamentally, the Money-God's creation is forged by actively repressing forms/values/ideals (even if it is accomplished through endogenising critical values as we have seen above) whilst also imposing a new set of imperatives.

Money's psychological similarity to 'divinity' was long ago detected by Simmel. For insofar as the "...essence of the notion of God is that all diversities and contradictions of the world achieve a unity in him", he argues, likewise, money is also the center in which the most opposed find their common denominator. In sum, having the peculiar strength of an abstract but concrete reality not able to dissolve into something relative, money provides "... an elevated position beyond the particular and a confidence in its omnipotence" which is perfectly suitable to the role of an "Absolute" (2005, pp. 237-238). In addition to this, money lends people "... such a measure of unified combination of interests, of abstract heights, of sovereignty over the details of life that it reduces the need to search for such satisfactions in religion" (2005, p. 238).

But the psychological affinity of money with God does not mean that when it becomes one, humanity lives in the same old ways as it did when 'the transcendent' was at the center of social life (either in its religious or secular forms). In reality, when it moves away from its role as a simple "bearer of values" to grow as an independent value and an end *per se*, money reveals a very specific kind of 'potency'.

If the religion of ‘monotheistic theologies’ existed by way of a number of ‘absolute ends’ – the ‘laws’ determined by God – money has no end of its own. Still, money is certainly more ‘absolute’ than the power established by the multiple ‘transcendentals’ of modernity, Dufour suggests (2008). In modern times, he notes, individuals were ‘invited’ to submit to multiple and sometimes contradictory ‘transcendental laws’ and, simultaneously, encouraged to disobey these laws by virtue of their own individual ‘critical rationality (Dufour 2009)’. In contrast, the logic of commodities (or what I am calling here the money-God), admits no multiplicity or critique: as an end, it liquidates all ends and reduces them to means.

The free market, a kind of ‘sanctuary’ for the money-God is, as Dufour remarks, “... more powerful than all the other Subjects, and they have to bow before it one after the other. Globalization implies the disappearance or relativization of nation states, republics and kingdoms and all their so-called universal laws, which suddenly look very specific to them” (Dufour 2008, p. 60).

In the Kantian “kingdom of ends”, wherein “everything has either a price or a dignity” (Kant 1964, p. 434) money, a means par excellence, has no dignity. Its kingdom is that of means, of quantities, of the interchangeability of things, a kingdom of objective and traceless connections, whereby nothing is specific and everything can be replaced for its numeric equivalent<sup>23</sup>.

In Simmel’s words: if money is “... accepted as the only principle of reality, reality is submitted to broadly the same process that the reduction to money value exercises on the objects of our practical interest” (Simmel 2005, p. 274). That is, in a nutshell, the destruction of all intrinsic specificity of objects and experiences. For the growing importance of money, he notes, depends exactly on “... it being cleansed of everything that is not merely a means, because its clash with the specific characteristics of objects is thereby eliminated” (Simmel 2005, p. 232).

The cleansing of everything that is not merely a means such as cultural forms, ends and ideals so that everything can be exchanged and replaced by a calculated equivalent, is therefore a condition of the modern money economy - “the economy of

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<sup>23</sup> Referring to the Kantian idea, Keohane remarks that some things have *both* price *and* dignity. The author gives the example of houses, “... whereby subjective culture is developed and institutionalized ... as the end in an otherwise endless sequence of purposes that money can serve” (Keohane 2013, p. 66). In Simmelian terms, objects acquired by money may sometimes represent resistance and meaningful limits to the flow of life, while it’s money *per se* that suffers from the predicament of being an intrinsically valueless means.

means in the strictest sense” (Simmel 2005, p. 379). Hence, the weakening of ‘dignity’ is the natural implication of the deregulated ascendancy of money as an absolute.

Dufour is therefore touching on a fundamental aspect, theoretically anticipated by Simmel, and now fully realized, when he declares: “... commodities exchanges are, in a word, beginning to desymbolize the world” (2008, p. 4).

By that, Dufour means that when the logic of commodities takes the lead, all exchanges that have survived as a reference to traditional, ethical, transcendent or transcendental – are not to stand in the way. He writes: “... neo-liberalism certainly targets collective agencies (the family, trade unions, political forms, nation-states and more generally, culture insofar as it is a site for generational transmission and collective representations) because they might hinder the free circulation of commodities” (Dufour 2008, p. 92).

The values underpinning collective agencies, usually tied to specific ends and existing within determined symbolic boundaries may possibly constitute an unwanted resistance, either critical or political, to the free flow of money.

Etymologically, the word ‘symbol’ comes from Greek *symbolon* “token, watchword, sign by which one infers; ticket, a permit, license” (Harper n.d), embedded in the general understanding of symbol as ‘something that represents or stands for something else’.

Money is a symbolic phenomenon, possessing no value of its own beyond its worth as means, a thing that is able to ‘stand for’ concrete and varied purposes which are external to itself (Simmel 2005, p. 260). However, by becoming forcibly an end, it reveals itself as it is: nothing but a pure immanence, formless and fully emptied of all symbolic contents - money is the symbol that is, so to speak, ‘only money’.

In contemporary social practices, we are not short of concrete situations wherein moral, civic, aesthetical, political, scientific, religious forms, as well as the intrinsic, concrete quality of people, things and thoughts are, in an increasingly naturalized way, either negated or ‘sold’ for the advantage of asymbolic money principles.

Indeed, it is not hard to find contemporary examples of the increasing capacity of the money-God to drain the worth of symbolic goods. Michael Sandel, in his *What Money Can't Buy: the Moral Limits of Markets* (2003), provides us with some. For instance, he describes the extension of the marketing device of ‘rebranding’ to what was once the ‘sacred domain’ of national identity when Tony Blair’s government decided to “rebrand Britain as one of the world’s pioneers rather than one of its museums”; the same principle incarnates, he notes, on the British Travel Authority’s choice of a new slogan to

represent the country, which shifts from “Rule Britannia” (alluding to the historically recognizable British identity) to “Cool Britannia” (Sandel 1998, p. 92), erasing all group-specificity and celebrating instead the generalized, ‘rational’ marketing motifs working upon individuals’ desires.

In the United States, Sandel points out the strategy adopted by various districts across the country of paying students a certain amount of money as a means to improve test scores, attendance and behavior (Sandel 2013, p. 51), which means that the logic of incentives, characteristic of ‘business discourses’, is imposed over and above Pedagogy and the meaning of knowledge.

Also in America, one finds the introduction of ‘pop culture stamps’ replacing historically relevant national figures usually honored in stamps by cartoons/films characters or other (commercially advantageous) pop culture images (Sandel 1998, p. 92). There is also the increasingly common practice (even outside the U.S) of imposing an economic approach to gift giving when shops sell ‘gift cards’ worth a certain amount of money in order to avoid the [economic] ‘value-destroying loss’ of a gift one may not like, surpassing concerns with values such as thoughtfulness and attentiveness inherent to traditional gift giving practices (Sandel 2013, p. 104).

In the realm of academy, the logic of the money-God incarnates in the new ‘managerial paradigm’ devoted to the pursuit of a very specific form of ‘excellence’ (Readings 1996). The new paradigm has been replacing ideals of culture, particularly national culture and also the intrinsic worth of knowledge. However, Readings (1996) points out that what is at stake is not the replacement of the previous grand narrative of nation-state (or ‘reason’) by the ‘grand narrative of excellence’, but the end of all grand traditions whilst universities tend to turn into transnational corporations.

Thus, the discourse of excellence has, according to the author, any meaningful reference to the quality of intellectual work / thought, being more akin to the quantifiable technical and bureaucratic standards of the cost-accountant. Standards based on ideas of efficacy and success in the application of means to achieve determined ends, measured by criteria such as margins of profit, number of prizes, quantity of publications and general performativity. Within this context, professionals are being assessed by volume of productivity and social visibility, all converted into marketing and cash value.

To this list, I would add what I think to be perhaps one of the most everyday instances through which a symbolic impoverishment pervades our lives: television and advertisements in its widely known subservience to numbers through the law of either

‘audience’ or ‘marketing research indicators’ surpassing, if needed, any aesthetical and moral concerns.

Since everything can be sold and bought – values, justice, beauty, knowledge – the absolute character of the money-God seems clear: it works by undoing all other ‘competing authorities’ on the way, even the most meaningful ones.

In addition to ‘draining’ the dignity of objects and experiences, the value of objects has been increasingly decided solely by its price. This happens in a cultural context in which the intrinsic worth of objects to which money is indifferent to – in its cultural, aesthetical, moral worth – becomes blurred. In this regard, Dufour mentions the common mindset between contemporary artists according to which it is impossible to distinguish art from “shit” provided that the “deject” is sold for a good price (Dufour 2013, p. 31).

The ability to distinguish between one and another work of art depends on the existence of certain symbolic markers – what is good, what is bad; what is real, what is false; what is art, what is not – and also, Dufour notes, it depends on a hierarchy of value (Dufour 2010). But in a context wherein, as discussed earlier, hierarchies and any kind of order are seen – against Mary Douglas’ sensitivity – as excesses of power and in its limits, a harbinger of totalitarianism, qualitative distinctions are seriously challenged. In the empty space of meaning – when, as Jameson (1991) pointed out, there is no hermeneutic relationship to be possibly established with typical cultural products of the ‘postmodern era’ supported solely in their ‘actual image’ – personal visibility (the capacity of each artist to sell himself as a brand) and “price” advance as the Supreme allocators of worth.<sup>24</sup>

In the “comedy of subversion” (Dufour 2009, p. 244, *my transl.*) that became contemporary art (in which things like the artist’s shit and recently used preservatives are

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<sup>24</sup> An eminent example of this phenomenon is Damian Hirst’s “For the Love of God” – a platinum skull covered with 8,601 diamonds. The piece animated the public for any reason more significant than its price tag: 50 million pounds, the most expensive piece of contemporary art ever created. The idea of ‘money’ and ‘the creation of oneself as a brand’ as the assigners of worth seems to be further revealed by speculations that the artist fabricated the news that the skull was sold by such a high price as an elaborate strategy to attract publicity and increase the value of all his works. Eugenio Merino’s controversial Damien Hirst sculpture called “4 the love of Go(l)d” reinforces this interpretation. The sculpture shows a figure of Hirst (wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the sparkling skull sculpture) shooting himself in the head ‘in the name of money’. This interpretation is given by Merino himself (a self-declared admirer of Hirst). He speaks to The Guardian newspaper: “I thought that, given that he thinks so much about money, his next work could be that he shot himself. Like that the value of his work would increase dramatically... obviously, though, he would not be around to enjoy it.”

to be considered as art as long as the artist declares it to be an oeuvre of art),<sup>25</sup> the shocking, the trivial, the amusing, don't destroy previous structures of meaning in order to invite individuals to occupy another, more sensitive, inspired or critical place. Subversion becomes, rather, a banal 'comedy' when there is neither any meaning to subvert, nor any meaning to be 'found'.

The downfall of all transcendental values (cultural forms) entails the decline of meaning and, in its place, the ascent of 'the egos'. This typically incarnates in contemporary art wherein all that stands is the artist's (and the audience's) 'right' to express or see whatever they want, whilst the oeuvre vanishes as something that 'hides' a meaning which "looks at / speaks to the individual", summoning him to go beyond himself (Dufour 2009, p. 243). In Simmel's words: "Life, anxious only to express itself, has, as it were, jealously withheld ... meaning from its product" (Simmel 1971b, p. 230).

In a world wherein transcendental principles, beliefs and forms are under suspicion, money has the advantage of not asking people for any kind of 'leap of faith'. The new God is purportedly here to be seen and capable of being verified by anyone without further sacrifice or irrational devotion. For instance: why the national identity of Britain should be preserved in campaigns disseminating its image if the *fact* is that the nation would prosper through a more attractive market-based image of itself? Against facts, the worth of memories, collective identity and roots, already weak in the social imaginary, are nothing but irrational devotions and conditionings to be overcome. Likewise, to argue that paying money for students may pervert (even further) the intrinsic worth of learning and behaving well, has no force at all if calculus and statistics indicate simply that 'it works'!

Henceforth, the biblical exhortation 'those who have eyes to see and ears to hear' still applies to the new market-oriented doctrine, but it is no longer a metaphor for the capacity to see and hear the invisible, undetermined reality of spiritual truths. It applies instead as the crude affirmation of 'facts' - divorced from either religious beliefs or the Kantian lucidity and, also, from societal ideals that generate moral, aesthetic and ideological sacred boundaries.

Yet, the money-rationality expands not only to objects that can be sold for money in the market. The discipline of economics is turning more abstract and its projects more ambitious, being described by some economists as a science of human behavior.

One of the forerunners of this changing discourse of economics is the economist Gary Becker who, in his book *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (1976)

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<sup>25</sup> The egotistic definition of art in a formless world is, of course, epitomized by the famous declaration attributed to Duchamp "If I say it's a work of art, it's a work of art".



advocates a rational determinant for behaviors against any "... reluctance to submit certain kinds of human behavior to the 'frigid' calculus of economics" (Becker 1976, cited in Sandel 2013, pp. 48-49).

Clearly, 'rationality' as described by 'rational choice theory' of which Becker was one of the earliest proponents, means that a rational action is one in which the individual act *as if* balancing costs against benefits to arrive at an action that maximizes personal advantage. That being so, those who resist the economic approach to behavior, writes Becker, understands behavior as "... ignorance and irrationality, values and their frequent unexplained shifts, custom and tradition, the compliance somehow induced by social norms" (Becker 1976, cited in in Sandel 2013, p. 51).

In a culture wherein money is at the center of societies' organization, the generalization of this economic approach to behavior is, in Simmel's rationale, expected. For money is associated with the intellectualization of experience, a tendency to orient action on the basis of cognitive rather than normative or social expectations (Poggi 1993).

As discussed earlier, in the contemporary calculative world, customs, traditions, social ideals and norms - in a word, culture – tend to be seen not only as irrationalities but, even further, as synonyms of barbarism.

Isaiah Berlin (1988, 2002) elaborates on the issue. Berlin was worried with conditions in which the universalizing status of an ideal may justify all kinds of actions, including violence, in order to fulfil it. Now, this is not the same as negating the worth of ideals and values *per se*. Berlin's point was, rather, to inquire on the *nature* of human values and ideals, which, he argues, does not afford exclusive, final solutions which deny moral conflict, disagreement and dilemma (Hardy 2000). His essential (and, in my opinion, rightful) claim was, thus, that 'monist utopianisms' – based on the notion of a 'perfect state' or ultimate harmony' as the proper goal of our endeavors – is both mistaken (since it denies the 'unfinished character' of human life) and dangerous (for if an idea is taken as a 'universal truth' or a 'ultimate end', any sacrifices for the sake of its realization may be felt as justified).

The problem with this kind of criticism is, of course, the potential it has to degrade into an equally totalizing rejection of social order (with its ideals, limits and constraints), inducing neo-liberal deregulation.

Indeed, the idea widely promoted by economists after the end of the Cold War – in a kind of over-simplification of Berlin's ideas - was that ideals are dangerous things always leading to disaster. After so many historical examples of the potential blindness of ideals – the corruption of Marxist ideals and its degradation into the Stalinist terror being

usually in the neo-liberal spotlight – concerns with the ‘common good’ should leave way, so the argument goes, to the sole reason to be pursued: the removal of constraints for individual liberty. Individuals would thus be the sole Gods of their own private lives determined by “negative freedom”, that is, a freedom of absences: of laws, constraints or interference from others (Curtis 2007).

A kind of consecration of absences is thus defended by the adherents of ‘negative freedom’ under the premises that when the ‘freedom from’ is replaced by ‘the freedom to’ live a determined form of life (prescribed by ideals) brutal tyranny will follow.

But if this liberty of absences, of constraints, of ideals and ends leaves us closer to God-like powers, it also makes us less distinct from animals. God-like powers are the clear effect of negative freedom in which in the absence of any resistance, infinite options are available. But if we are to stay under a state of negative liberty for too long, we may end up, as animals, ‘liberated’ from endowing life with meaning and purpose (Marques 2011, p. 76), liberated, in Simmel’s words, from “... that life-content, that inner bond, amalgamation and devotion” which ‘though it restricts the personality, none the less gives support and content to it’ (Simmel 2005, p. 406).

Marquis de Sade – according to Dufour, the intellectual who most perfectly (in a shockingly plainspoken manner) deducted all the logical consequences of the liberal standpoint (Dufour 2013, p. 173) – paints the picture of a world based on the principle of men and animals’ equalization. In his novels, the pleasure principle exults in its excesses unrestrained by ethics, religion or any idea of a social pact.

It is not a lawless world, however. Now it is Nature that subordinates individuals as “the blind instruments of her inspirations”. In the meanwhile, individuals are not merely licensed but summoned (or even obliged) to transgress all limits: “... were she to order us to set fire to the universe, the only crime possible would be in resisting her” (de Sade 1990, p. 138).

But by delivering themselves to all impulses – and to the unlimited, negative freedom that money as a God implies, which is a freedom without an end – individuals may find themselves not simply enjoying the liberty to choose. Rather, if by overcoming collective binding rules and fully yielding to our animality we may feel free and unfettered, it also evokes the suffering brought about the contingency of an existence wherein everything is possible and everything could be different (Szakolczai 2009).

Kehl (2009a) analyzes the impacts of the current imperatives of pleasure and enjoyment over the individual's psyche, proposing an inversion of the typical understanding of the relationship between depression and inhibition. She argues that the

idea that depression is the single explanation of inhibition (and social isolation) that marks depressive experiences is inaccurate or, at least, incomplete. In her view, first the individual detaches himself (from the world) and then he/she gets depressed (2009a, p.194). The world from which the individual retracts, she notes, is one in which pleasure becomes as accessible as obligatory, more on the terms of compulsion than on the terms of desire. Thus, the inhibition and social isolation that underpins depressive experiences are, often, healing attempts (even if ill-succeeded) from the part of subjects. Kehl's argument, in short, is that when the depressed retracts from the world to isolate himself in his own confined subjective terror, he is somehow questioning (without knowing that) the mandates of continuous (but hollow) enjoyment, performance, and consumerism.

The argument is not intuitive. To say that pleasure is what underpins depression (by definition marked by absence of pleasure) is against common sense, especially in a world wherein we learn that all one needs to be 'happy' is freedom to do those things that give him/her pleasure. In that line of reasoning, if you are free to enjoy and to do what you want, you have no reasons whatsoever to be depressed. Depressives, themselves - at conscious levels at least - also buy the idea. That's why they frequently reveal their puzzlement and sometimes their guilty for being so deeply sad when (purportedly) they could enjoy all the pleasures of life.

Andrew Solomon, for instance, in the pinnacle of his depressive pain - when he could barely eat, walk, take a bath or sleep - tells his father: "I used to work twelve hours and then go to four parties in an evening some days. What happened?".

In a world where the supreme law is to self-develop, succeed and to enjoy, the idea that a highly performing individual may suffer from depression sounds like a contradiction, opening the way for views of the problem as a purely chemical phenomenon that steals the individual from a otherwise wonderful life.

What this view fails to consider is that the liberty to choose everything and the intensities of limitless enjoyment without any boundaries / limits on sight can turn itself into a heavy load of which one may attempt to be relieved.

In Simmel's words: "... this freedom may be compared with the fate of the insecure person who has forsworn his Gods and whose newly acquired 'freedom' only provides the opportunity for making an idol out of any fleeting value" (Simmel 2005, p. 405).

The problem gains empirical substance through the story of one of Kehl's patients. D. is a young man divided between the hyperactivity of the raves – when he would switch from anti-depressive medication to ecstasy – and the reclusiveness of his

room. Kehl (2009a) points out that even though the only form of leisure that was appealing for D. was the excitement of the raves, it wouldn't produce any experience to be later reported (and made public) in the analytical sessions. Rather, what he would report was a sensation of emptiness that followed each explosion of pleasure, she writes, the "... very opposite of the pure intensity without fantasy experienced during a night or two" (Kehl 2009a, p. 105). Thus, putting aside these moments of extreme excitement, depression would incarnate in the questions that D. frequently posed to his analyst: "I can do this or that... but for what?" (Kehl 2009a, p. 105).

These questions suggest that despite his 'marathons of pleasure' something was missing in D's life: reasons for action. In itself, pleasure and excitement do not generate experience (in the Benjamin's sense) things to be said, to be made public, transmitted to others, nor it provide reasons to act. Even desire is not an implicit of pleasure, since – as Brinkmann (2004) claims – we desire things not merely because we like it (or find pleasure in it), but because they are desirable, which may only be determined in reference to values and qualified discrimination of 'things that matter'.

Now, an action or project can only be experienced as 'desirable', still according to Brinkmann (2004), within a 'moral ecology' that determines the worth of things.

The problem is that, as Kehl (2009a) notes, in a social imaginary wherein individuals should be sovereign of themselves and wherein enjoyment is supreme, D. could find few references upon which to create fantasies able to represent a future to be desired and a life to be constructed. That's exactly the point wherein all the excitement seemed to shift, in his experience, into inhibition and then, depression.

Interesting is to see that the purported sovereignty of a "pure individual" independent from any reasons for life outside pleasure and satisfaction, that is, outside himself, tends to boil down to new dependence because of the fact – long ago illuminated by Durkheim - that this entity 'without historical antecedents, without a social milieu' does not exist, unless as an abstraction: the ideal individual of neo-liberalism. As Durkheim puts it:

The actual man has nothing in common with this abstract entity. He partakes of an age and a country; he has ideas and feelings which come not from himself but from those around him; he has prejudices and beliefs; he is subject to rules of action which he did not make but which he nevertheless respects. He has aspirations of all sorts and many concerns other than keeping his budget economically (1973, p. 38)

Indeed, despite of this abstract, discursive autonomy, obligations and ‘idols’ abound in real life, in the guise of both ‘normative autonomy’ - the obligation to choose and master all aspects of one’s life - and in the ‘feast’ of enjoyment and consumption (with brands becoming the new symbolic markers).

Thus, whereas the ‘cosmic axis’ of the Australian Alchippa tribe – founding a world centered on the divine – is now disenchanted, the Money-god becomes in many senses the new ‘sacred pole’ of contemporary societies. But the direction to which the ‘sacred pole of money’ continuously bends does not lead, going back to Eliade’s definition, to “... the passage from the virtual and the amorphous to that which has form” (Eliade 1987, p. 55). Rather, as we’ve seen, it opens the way to homogeneity (where there is no qualitative but only numeric discrimination between things) and relativity (where everything and anything can be, provided that the calculus is correct and consequences realized in a pragmatic way).

In other words, in a world where the money-God rules, the profanation of the sacred increases - for money transforms into means all sacred ideals that would clash with its fundamental requirements of impersonality, transience, instrumentality, abstractness and potentiality - while the profane plane of numbers, calculus and pragmatic rationality is sacralized.

That’s a tremendous appeal, and one with a clear religious character: to abandon or surpass the inherent ambiguity of human reason and commands, in order to live instead in the ‘heavens of certainty’ provided we follow the Law (of economics). As Latour (2014, p. 10) puts it: “How to resist the transcendence of capitalism parading as immanence?”.

However, despite the illusions of liberation that this ‘immanence parade’ might induce, the new political-economic theology of money subtly but powerfully exerts the same determining role over our fate: ‘the direction towards which it bends’ commands - without space for human critique or doubt, since it’s a neutral Law who’s ‘commanding’ - the route which societies should take. The new Law commands unconstrained economic growth as the supreme uncontestable rule, whilst any critical force which throws doubt or attempts to hamper it from the vantage point of a different set of values is treated as heretical.

Hence, if once we suffered, on the cultural realm, under the oppressive force of traditional prejudices and by the modern affirmation of ‘hyper-absolutes’ and, on the organizational plane, under the chains of bureaucratic systems, we now suffer not only

from the “tyranny of choice” (Salecl 2011) but from an excessive sacralization of immanence.

As faithful devotees of the political-economic theology of market fundamentalism, Western contemporary people increasingly incorporate the instrumental rationality of the market as their own. But instrumental rationality traps individuals within the narrowness of its pragmatic mindset and thus, ‘reason’ is converted into a disengaged, acritical and desymbolized tool, disregarding the fundamental domain of human satisfactions arising from bonds with things ‘greater than ourselves’ as Durkheim so many times stressed.

In the ‘new faith’ all that should stand is the “I” – it is not coincidental that there is rarely a single advert that does not repeat the chorus: “I can”; “I deserve”; “I choose”; “I do”; “I achieve”. For sure, this may sound as good news, but only as long as we do not look closer to what is behind the cheerful façade of the all-powerful individual. If we do, a much more confuse and ambiguous universe is revealed. One in which individuals are continuously invited / seduced to forge a sovereign existence which, in reality, is belied by strongly gregarious behavior obedient to the commodities’ flows. In the meanwhile, the human gifts of critical thinking and of cultural rootedness become increasingly deficient.

In a world losing faith in ideals other than the utilitarian and ‘egoistic’ ones, individuals may end up as ‘released’ as emptied of the ‘devotion to something’ which is what gives meaning to a purely individual action without properties. As we’ve seen in the experience of D. analyzed above, that’s a societal universe wherein, despite all the potentiality of the ‘I’, actions may lose meaning, calling forth the expansion of depression.

In sum, when the calculative, mathematical rationality of money reaches spheres of life traditionally governed by nonmarket norms, divorcing them from symbolic meanings they formerly held (supposedly “irrational” values and ideals which nonetheless make life feel richer and purposeful); when we are “released” but have no symbolic pointers to guide us for what we want to do with this liberation; when egoism, self-interest and ‘self-expression’ are erected as rules as if individual action were unconcerned with social ties and objective values, we may fundamentally lack, as Stiegler puts it, “...the goals and motives without which the human being is little more than an algorithmic machine, that is, a system of comparisons reduced to a set of calculations without a point (sans object)” (2013, p. 5). Meaninglessness ensues.

## 8.4 - Concluding remarks

To conclude the section, I would like to untangle an apparent contradiction that these reflections might imply. To bring it into the form of a question: how is it possible, without falling into an irreconcilable paradox, to say that there is still a collective order of meaning (a transcendence, under the form of the new religion of money as a God, its laws and commandments, exhortations and sanctions) and yet, maintain that this new order fosters meaninglessness?

This could sound as the same as to defend the somewhat awkward claim that the money-God is a new form of symbolization which, in turn, fosters desymbolization. But as much paradoxical and awkward as it might seem, that's exactly the case: the political-economic theology of money keeps a "close watch on authorized meanings" (Dufour 2008, p. 156) defining norms which become collectively shared. However, these norms are of a type that fosters desymbolization / meaninglessness. This is so because when 'means' are divinized, any values or cultural references which may come between individuals and commodities are unwelcome (Dufour 2008). As a result, what is chiefly promoted is a self-referential individual living for nothing other than himself, a situation which, as claimed above, does not sustain meaning.

Thus, the new 'symbolization' of money brings about a new set of 'values', all of which consistent to its logics and detrimental to symbolization and meaningfulness. Among them, we mentioned: the instrumentalization of life; the prevalence of a pragmatic rationality concerned with consequences but not with 'reasons'; the sacralization of formlessness (and limitlessness) and the promotion of 'egoism'.

For the sake of clarity, I will finish by reiterating here, in a more schematic form, the ideas presented throughout the chapter, that allows the conclusion that it is not simply the historical absence of meanings *per se*, but the presence of a new transcendent order of meaning that we must define if we want to understand and, hopefully, deal with this widespread feeling of meaninglessness and the associated epidemic of depression.

First, for the very fact that 'money' is a pure means (establishing no ends by itself), when societies sanctify it, what becomes sacred is 'immanence' while all 'things that matter' - embodied in principles, collectively shared values - are profaned and tend to be 'sold' by money.

Second, it does not create, keeping with Durkheim's definition, sacred ideas with the capacity to grant meaning to life, that is, "...a sort of moral supremacy which raises it far above private aims" (1973, p. 51). On the contrary, the new transcendence of the

money-God is founded exactly, as we have seen above, on the private individual, the one independent from all collective forms and public regulations unless those which protect his (negative) freedom.

Third, an ideology of pleasure or ‘the obligation to enjoy’ (Dufour 2009) is consecrated as the primary dogma of the neo-liberal theology. But while pleasure without self-restraint leaves individuals liberated from limits, it also leaves them lacking limits, suffering from freedom without structure, ends and purposes. Linked to it, since humans are, in reality, always constituted within a social milieu, the liberated pleasure-seeking individuals end up as “... free soldiers of forces they are unaware of” (Dufour 2009, p. 15 *my transl.*).

Fourth, contradictory as it might seem at first, the reign of pleasure and the flattering of human passions are joined, as we have mentioned, by the equally widespread belief and strict submission to the norms of performance and the associated imperative of action, according to which individual initiative is continuously required. The paradox is quickly unveiled if one thinks of the ‘two arms’ of market reasons: productivity and consumption – both depending on different arrangements of initiative and the liberation of passions. But here, again, even though the contemporary ‘demand of self-realization’ becomes institutionalized in the form of laws constraining individuals from without, it is still founded upon egoistic aims (competitiveness, individual performance of the ‘pure individual’ etc.) and thus also leave individuals disconnected from reasons for action beyond personal interests. In the context of the theology of the money-God, ‘authentic self-realization’ favors de-regulation and ‘negative freedom’.

Finally, if the new religion incorporates both Reason and Individualism as its new sacred totems, it is however in any way the case that either knowledge (as related to the capacity of reflection and the spirit of critique), or individuality (in the form of individual dignity and autonomy which don’t preclude membership to society) are today realized. Contrarily, the impersonal and unstoppable powers of the new tyrannical God provoke the constant decadence of both, feeding the cultivation of a vain individual life. That’s a life marked by a type of knowledge which is too narrow to become wisdom, and by the precarious individuality of a self-referential individual whose personal power ‘without object’ risks dissipating into meaninglessness.

In sum, the contemporary collective order of meaning - under the effects of the transcendence of the money-God – has been imposing a pragmatic, calculative, egoistic rationality which is spreading to the whole of society as a new social demand. However, such rationality and the norms it implies: e.g. the devotion to a pragmatic reason that



establishes what is 'useful' in each circumstance at hand rather than the devotion to any sacred principles of ethics, morality, beauty, criticism and so on; the values of limitless enjoyment and self-idolatry inherent to the ideal subject in market-based societies; and, finally, the ethics of authentic self-realization (capitalized by market reasons) do not constitute narratives capable to signify life. That is, the human search for addressing the 'useless' question of the meaning and purpose of existence – 'What is it all for?' - cannot find, in the useful pragmatics of the 'money rationality' any meaningful narratives beyond those based on instrumental reasons and the fundamentally deceptive affirmation of the 'sovereign I'.

## Chapter 9: Depression and meaninglessness in the contemporary culture of the money-God

More and more people in contemporary Western societies tend to feel, sometimes without knowing why and how to describe it, that we are losing something; a vague sensation (although mostly illusory) that the past was better after all, and life more meaningful. This vague sensation of the meaninglessness of life may often lead to a degree of nostalgia for the past, or it can emerge in a continuous (and usually frustrated) search for communities to join in order to awaken our feelings of belonging and sacredness. Still, it can incarnate in the individual body (in its psychological and physical levels) through the painful, asymbolic suffering of depression in which ‘everything is bad, but nothing is wrong in particular’.

When desymbolization grows under the auspices of money as a God, it is small wonder that depression - a mental suffering that cannot be symbolized (depression is sometimes experienced as standing for anything else, a suffering that just ‘is’, without any ‘point’) - emerges epidemically.

In this regard, I cannot fail to mention the work of the philosopher, sociologist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. In her *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia* (1989) Kristeva elaborates on the Freudian theorization of melancholia, reconceptualizing what she terms the composite “melancholia-depression” as a linguistic malady whose primary symptom is chronic asymbolia or loss of speech and meaning (Kristeva 1989, p. 10).

Kristeva acknowledges but yet goes beyond the Freudian understanding of depression as the concealed hatred of a lost love object, theorizing about a specific form of depression which she terms “narcissistic depression”. In the latter, individuals mourn not the lost object but an unnameable pre-object. That is to say, the unsymbolizable sadness of narcissistic depression has, in Kristeva’s interpretation, old roots: an archaic, precocious narcissistic wound leading to inadequate integration into the symbolic. Asymbolia, in Kristeva’s accounts, results from the individual’s failure to deal – at the first stages of her/his psychic development - with “...the sine qua non condition of our individuation: the matricide” (1989, p. 28).

Individuation relies on the negation of the symbiotic relation with the mother (the semiotic) – a domain of imaginary completeness where there is no experienced separation between individual and reality – as to ingress into the world of society, language and signs (the symbolic). But this is exactly what depressives cannot realize, she claims. Instead, they “...disavow the negation: they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically

fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose, to which they remain painfully riveted” (Kristeva 1989, pp. 43-44).

On her experiences with depression, Elizabeth Wurtzel (1997, p. 7) writes: “... when I am off drugs, when my head is clean and clear of this clutter of reason and rationality, what I am mostly thinking is: Why? Why take it like a man? Why be mature? Why accept adversity?”. After saying that, Elizabeth rationalizes her assertion and adds: “I don’t like to sound as a spoiled brat. I know that into every sunny life a little rain must fall and all that, but in my case, the crisis-level hysteria is an all-too-recurring theme.” (1997, p.7). The passage is in great consonance with Kristeva’s argument. Despite being rationally aware that human life is inherently incomplete, Elizabeth faces difficulty or even refusal to abandon the delusive (and impossible) state of imagined completeness and to deal with the inescapable lack at the heart of human life.

The problem is that the brightness of imagined completeness, or in Kristeva’s terms, “the supreme good” of intense, archaic, unnameable affects is also, and at the same time, the darkness of silence and lack of representation. The Nervalian metaphor of the “black sun” is thus borrowed by Kristeva to designate depression as an intense affect which painfully escapes conscious articulation: “... an insistence without presence, a light without representation” (1989, p. 13) or yet, “... an abyssal suffering that does not succeed in signifying itself and, having lost meaning, loses life” (1989, p. 189).

Kristeva’s ideas are, for sure, relatively consistent to the Lacanian informed accounts of Dufour, Lebrun and Žižek earlier discussed: it’s the imposition of a Law (arising from the Name-of-the-Father, the Other, the Subject) that positively dissolves the child’s imaginary idea that he is one with his Mother and with the world and introduces him to the domain of language, culture and society.

As earlier discussed, from this point of view, the Law of the symbolic father can only be operative insofar as it finds room in the social realm: the Father’s discourse has to be rooted within the broader symbolic order of language and its collective enunciators in order to be effective.

Going back to Elizabeth’s Wurtzel’s experiences, we may think that in order to escape from the symbolic emptiness of delusive completeness, she needed the Law of the Father (even if it was to be found in the discourse of the Mother, as the representative of the symbolic order). However, her ‘real father’ was mostly absent, whereas social ideals and values - to which the ‘paternal function’ should refer – were (as Elizabeth herself describes) in a state of fragmentation and confusion.

Elizabeth was born a single child of a marriage that ended when she was only two years old. As a child, Elizabeth was a precocious and smart little girl who excelled at school and sports, who was stubborn and domineering, and who believed, as she states, that she could do anything that she wanted to (1997, p.34). But such a life impulse and self-assurance, she reports, would not last long.

On that, she writes: “It is hard for me to remember a life that was so cocksure, so free of self-doubt, so pure in its certainty. How did all that life-force energy turn so completely into a death wish? How quickly it seemed that my well-developed superego managed to dissolve into buckets of free-flowing, messy id?” (1997, p, 36).

Elizabeth’s own reflections point towards insightful answers.

About the relationship she had with her mother, Elizabeth describes it as close and intense. She tells how she would, as a child, frequently switch roles with her mother, helping the latter to pick out boyfriends after the divorce, trying to control the mother’s smoking habits or encouraging her in moments of financial difficulties. Her father was mostly absent, even when he was with the daughter. She writes: “In all my early memories of him, he is sleeping, or just waking up, or about to go to sleep” (1997, p. 26). When he was awake and would talk with her, Elizabeth says, “... almost nothing my father told me ever really stuck because I was convinced that he was nuts himself” (1997, p. 28). In an interesting passage, Elizabeth reports that, when she was little, one of her favorite activities was to stand on her father’s feet as he held her for balance, “quite literally walking in his footsteps” (1997, p . 32), she writes. She would also make her father leave his shoes outside her bedroom door so that she could be sure that the father was still there: “It was like I knew he was planning to disappear on me sometime” (p. 32). In addition to this marginally involved ‘father figure’ represented by her ‘real father’, Elizabeth inherited from both of her parents what she herself describes as a fragmented symbolic heritage. In her words:

When I try to understand where I made a bad turn, how I stupidly meandered down the wrong road in the fork of life, I can’t shake the sense that being born smack in the middle of the Summer of Love (July 31, 1967), with the confluence of social revolutions from no-fault divorce to feminism to free love to Vietnam – and their eventual displacement by punk rock and Reaganomics – all had something to do with it. I hate to think that personal development, with its template of idiosyncrasies, can be reduced to explanations as simple as ‘it was the times’, but the sixties counterculture –

along with its alter ego, eighties greed – has imprinted itself all over me (p. 20).

Following, she describes how her parents found themselves struck between traditional beliefs and new sense that anything was possible, living marriages that they once deemed a necessity “...in a world that was suddenly saying: No necessities! No accidents! Drop everything!” (1997, p. 21). Rather than taking advantage of the new (potential) freedom, she explains, a lot of frustration emerged, while she became, in her words, “... the battlefield on which all their ideological differences were fought” (1997, p. 23). For instance, she writes that her mother sent her “ ... to the synagogue nursery school, thinking this would provide me with some sense of community and stability, while my dad, who turned up to see me about once a week, would talk to me about atheism, insisting I eat lobster, and ham, and other nonkosher foods that I thought were not allowed... This went on, back and forth, for years, until it was clear that all three of us were caught mostly in the confusing crossfire of changing times, and what little foundation my parents could possibly give me was shattered and scattered by conflict” (1997, pp. 23-24).

What makes Elizabeth’s report so useful to the aim of finding empirical substance to the theoretical argument developed in this study is her capacity to understand how her personal drama - evolving up to the point wherein she became this ‘unhappy, nihilistic girl’ – was lived within collective grounds marked by blurred symbolic foundations. Elizabeth could hardly be more specific when she writes: “I really believe that had either of them had any strong convictions or values to pass on to me, my worldview might have emerged as more sanguine than sanguinary” (1997, p. 24).

That’s an insightful metaphor. Indeed, the fragility of a symbolic heritage in terms of values means that individuals are thrown to their own individual intensities whereas the life-force drifts without those regulating symbolic mediators that would limit and provide it with content, form and direction. Individuals living a formless, meaningless life are not sanguine – purposeful, optimistic, socially involved. Rather, lacking meaning, individual life can be as sanguinary as death (the unrepresentable experience par excellence), a mere process towards dissolution.

In Elizabeth’s words: “... process, process, process – all for naught. Everything is plastic, we’re all going to die sooner or later, so what does it matter. That was my motto” (1997, p. 11).

Kristeva is exactly analyzing how periods of ‘meaning crisis’ impact individuals’ subjectivity and rebound in the experience of life as a meaningless process. She writes:

“The periods that witness the downfall of political and religious idols, periods of crisis, are particularly favorable to black moods” (1989, p. 8) or still, “... both religious and political, the crisis finds its radical rendering in the crisis of signification” (1989, p. 222).

The author is particularly concerned with how crises of signification emerge from the “...political and military Cataclysms” which “... are dreadful and challenge the mind through the monstrosity of their violence (that of a concentration camp or of an atomic bomb)” (1989, p. 223). For her, the monstrosity of the twentieth century’s destructive forces, especially in the Second World War, hollowed out the symbolic means through which any meaning could be attached to a conflict of such a magnitude. Having their systems of representation and perception incapacitated by the unnameable of tragedy, the only adequate answer to such an unnameable horror that blinds is silence.

The argument of this study is, alternatively, that beyond lived catastrophe and its perduring effects ruining vehicles of signification, the new faith of the Money-god has been projecting asymbolia from horror to banality. That is, the silence before the impossibility to represent tragedy – of which Kristeva talks – turns, in the political-economic theology of neo-liberalism, into the tragedy of the ‘everyday silence’ or ‘disarticulation’ about the symbolic worth of things beyond instrumentality, ego-glorification and pleasure gratification.

In the everyday silence of ultraliberal societies – which, I insist, can never be complete, and that’s why it is still possible to have a meaningful life - signification is emptied by more subtle and apparently softer means. Its ‘emptying methodologies’ work incessantly and independently of crisis, not through shock, but through the naturalization of social asymbolia under the imposition of a new faith: the fundamentalism of money as God and its side effects: the promotion of continuous enjoyment and performance of the sovereign individual.

In other words, if meaningless in the wake of catastrophe is the expectable but tragic collective condition favorable to black moods, the subtle, but incessant disarticulation of the symbolic order as a sort of *sine qua non* principle of the circulation of commodities, constitutes, beyond catastrophes, an insidious, day to day fuel for meaninglessness. For some, it may pathologically evolve to the hurtful experienced superficiality and fragility of purpose or, in the limit, to absence of signification for anything in life: that’s what we will very often hear behind the faint discourse of many depressed individuals.

As we've seen in chapter 4, humans' unique task to lead life beyond instincts and the linked need to signify existence, impel them to constitute the symbolic forms of culture as an accumulated and shared transcendence in which meaning can be found.

Since culture – the time-space wherein individuals share collective representations and thus, the domain of ideals, values and objective forms – is explicitly a target of a sacralized market that wants no borders to its neutral exchanges, the collective means to handle the human task of signifying experiences is continuously under attack. As a result, individuals' actions can miss the sense of purpose fundamentally linked to things which are dear to them beyond the simply useful and the short-term satisfactions of pleasure, compulsive action and narcissistic glorification of oneself.

Thereby, whereas for the majority, the impoverishment of meaning leads to a sense of (manageable) dissatisfaction, individuals suffering from depression may experience a hyper-lucidity about the arbitrary nature of meaning in signs (Eiselein 1991). But this is in no way a signal of his/her geniality or philosophical sensitivity; at least it does not seem to be the single motor of his / her depression. Rather, this is a painful lucidity of someone who suffers under the weight of social asymbolia and became a sort of, in Kristeva's terms, "... radical, sullen atheist" (1989, p. 5) living an existence in which "...signifiers cannot find a compensating way out of the states of withdrawal in which the subject takes refuge to the point of inaction or even suicide" (1989, p. 10).

What blinds today is thus, less the historical trauma of a non-representable violence, but the apparently radiant, cheerful glorification of the free sovereign individual invited to marvel himself with his self-image and personal performances purportedly forged by himself alone. But depression, as Kristeva sensitively states, is the hidden face of Narcissus, "...that countenance which - although it will carry him off into death - remains unperceived by him as, marveling, he contemplates himself in a mirage" (1987, p. 5).

As in Narcissus' myth, individuals stroke by depression are often unperceived of the gradual process underlying their apparently sudden and often inexplicable dive into suffering.

This is so, perhaps because for most people, it also remains unperceived that the collective silence about the symbolic worth of things is not a signal that we have elevated ourselves above symbolic subjection (Dufour 2008), so that we are now free to be happy and to enjoy life, but a much more desperate kind of silence. After being relatively released from or deprived of meaningful principles, normative borders, forms and values outside the purportedly independent self, individuals risk losing touch with the

meaningfulness of linguistic signs. We should note that depressives do not abandon - as psychotics to a certain extent do - the world of signs; they just cannot 'see' the meaningfulness in language, so that it often sounds to them as an absurd, ambiguous, and powerless task (Eiselein 1991, p. 137).

And when the situation progresses (in response to a cluster of different biographical and biological reasons within a 'reinforcing' sociological background of social deregulation) to a condition in which, for those gravely depressed "...it's a fierce trial attempting to speak a few words" (Styron 1990, p. 63) actions will soon feel indifferent and in its most hurting extremes, barely possible.

The sense of identity – who am I – is also affected by social deregulation (and meaninglessness) implicit in the advance of market as a God. Svend Brinkmann's ideas on 'identity' can illuminate the issue. The author argues that identity refers not only to one's acts and attributes (as psychological theories often articulates) but to one's deliberations about what matters, which is a function of the social imaginary to which one belongs, a framework of values that exist independently of the subject. He writes: "Our identities are framed by our relations to values, and the crux of our biographies is how we move and develop in relation to these values" (Brinkmann 2008, p. 411).

The challenging, potentially pathological aspect of societies when money ascends as a God is that the societal framework wherein individuals come to live is pervasively marked by a logic in which values, traditions and collective beliefs are either a barely irrelevant question of choice and preference, or irrationalities, obstacles on the way of a 'free' and 'rational' action.

Now, according to Brinkmann's (2008) perspective, this formula may address the existence of causal links for behavior (when things *happens* as a consequence of some mechanism, in this case, a function of individual desires and 'rational choices'), but not reasons for action (intentions expressing meaning, referring to moral frameworks). Drawing on Charles Taylor, Brinkmann calls these causal 'explanations' for behavior "weak evaluations" (things are good because we desire them), adding that:

... if the model of weak evaluation were the only model a person had recourse to in deliberating and explaining herself, we would find that this person led an extremely impoverished and inhuman life. All she could do was act on her strongest desire at any given moment. Such a person could never articulate a genuine reason for her actions, for she could not refer to any moral frameworks; all she could say was that she did something because her strongest desire made



her. In that sense, she could only refer to causes and not to reasons. If acting means acting for a reason, such an individual could not *act* at all (2008, p. 409).

In a context wherein exactly this model for explaining behaviors should subsist, it can be challenging for some people to find reasons for one's actions beyond desire. That is, while the person can still refer to causes (related to desires, wants and pragmatic needs), the space of reasons (rooted in values and beliefs) may become fragile.

Indeed, as Simmel insightfully argued, in a context wherein money levels the worth of all things through its "...capacity to reduce the highest as well as the lowest values equally to one value form and thereby to place them on the same level" (2005, p. 256), a "blasé attitude" towards life tends to be the typical response. Intrinsic to this attitude is the development of insensitivity for any value differences. The indiscriminate value of everything may lead to a feeling of the valuelessness of all things so that, in the next step, Simmel claims, the "blasé person" cannot experience great enthusiasm for anything.

Simmel could not be more accurate (and even prophetic about what can be deemed a hyper-developed tendency nowadays) in his interpretation of the immediate reaction to the evolving blasé experience of the world: a craving for excitement and extreme impressions (Simmel 2005, p. 258). These days, this craving is addressed and even stimulated by the 'fun morality' at the heart of 'deregulated capitalism', also attempting to find realization through the expanded "drive for activity" wherein "life is conceived as a series of projects; the more they differ from one another, the more valuable they are" (Chiapello & Fairclough 2002, cited in Petersen 2011, p. 16).

Nevertheless, the defensive strategy against the lack of substance of everyday life doesn't seem to work, writes Simmel, unless as "... temporary relief, but soon the former condition will be re-established, though now made worse by the increased quantity of its elements" (2005, p. 258).

Satiated by excitement and pleasure but with a weakened sense of value-discrimination from which "... the whole liveliness of feeling and volition originates" (Simmel 2005, p. 257), the attraction of all things in life may decrease. This situation is radicalized, we may argue, in a time when the calculative, egoistic logic of money becomes generalized and imposed as a supreme Law by the political-economic theology of neo-liberalism. As a result, the "grey hues" (Simmel 2005, p. 257) of the blasé experience may evolve, epidemically, to the dark hues of depression.

Thereby, the experienced shattering of identity (frequently embodied in feelings of worthlessness and also in the impossibility to name 'what matters' in life that marks

depressive experiences) and the linked ‘difficulty to act’ is in any way an incongruous ‘response’.

Rather, it can be (for some people and in some level) a symptom of the fragility of meaning in a world wherein “... all things float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money” (2000, p. 178).

An interesting question that could be raised here is: how these issues become manifested in the discourse of people experiencing depression? As discussed earlier, depressives are suffering a pain that has no clear addressees, which is well expressed, as stated above, by the formula ‘everything is bad, but nothing is wrong in particular’. Hence, if it is exactly a process of symbolic impoverishment generated and fueled by the ‘money religion’ that, as we are arguing here, underlies the increase of depression, depressive discourse will often be characterized by symbolic disarticulation, diminishment or lack of memories, and an impoverished use of language and thinking.

I refer here to an example of my own experience as a clinical supervisor. In her first psychotherapy session, Mary introduces herself and states that she is depressed. Before the psychotherapist could speak, Mary interrupts him and says; “Sorry, which tools do you have for helping me to get rid of depression?”. Without answering the question, the psychotherapist invites Mary to talk about herself. However, throughout the session, Mary’s discourse is basically descriptive: descriptions of symptoms, of interactions with different doctors, of trials with different medications, its collateral effects etc.

Her discourse is marked therefore by an emphasis on the life in its factuality, that is, a life that does not generate meaningful narratives, having virtually no space for qualitative reflections about existence. The latter would entail memories – and hence ‘things to be said’ according to Walter Benjamin - and interrogations about the existential vicissitudes of her individual (both private and public) life. Now, it is exactly this impoverished symbolic language that, in Mary’s case, suggests the shadows of meaninglessness behind her symptoms. Thus, even though Mary doesn’t say that her life is meaningless (rather, as most depressed individuals, she just depicts how everything became meaningless after depression) the form of her discourse – trapped in this kind of factual, merely descriptive terms, lacking reference to memories or representations for the future – suggest that.

I think therefore that any empirical examination of issues of meaninglessness behind the discourse of people experiencing depression should pay close attention not only to what the individual says, but also to what he/she does not, or cannot say –

everything that concerns the ultimate questions of Being: ‘Who am I? How should I live? What do I have to say about life? What are the reasons for my life projects?’. For it is perhaps in silence, and not in discourse that the traces of meaninglessness will be found.

Mary didn’t go on with the sessions (perhaps because she couldn’t get from the therapist any objective solutions for her problem as she expected). This, of course, limits the range of any potential conclusions about this case.

However, her discourse in this single session is typical of the general contemporary condition wherein money is Supreme, in which the domain of the empirical, merely biological or factual life dominates, whereas the qualified, political character of existence shrinks.

Increasing desymbolization in the auspices of money as God also impacts the way contemporary individuals have been experiencing time. This is, I think, another important aspect in other to understand, or at least to throw some light over sentiments of meaninglessness which underpin depression.

Time-wise, the calculative reason of the money-God is always present and transitory, merely circumstantial and without further consequences beyond each particular act - “... a perfectly postmodern God...reduced to a pure Providence of circumstances” (Dufour 2009, p. 92, *my transl.*).

That is, money transactions are exhausted as soon as the costs and benefits of options are weighted, and the greatest utility realized.

Since each new financial exchange will have to be once again weighted in accordance to all the circumstantial, fluctuating variables, they have no past and permanence. Under the rule of the money-God, exchanges are inherently present and temporary, leaving no traces behind (no memories) and limited by any specific ends (that is, linked with no particular future).

Thereby, when money becomes a God ruling the social body and impregnating individual life with its principles, time will tend to be experienced as lacking the meaningfulness coming from memories and ends. In regard to the consequences for the individual subjectivity which concern us here, it can only produce in Stiegler’s words “... herds of beings with difficulty to being and to become something, that is, beings without a future” (Stiegler 2004, n.p., *my transl.*)

‘Beings without a future’ sounds like an accurate description of depressed people: without any hopeful representation of tomorrow and without meaningful memories that press life to go on, depressives cannot act.

In contemporary times, a certain disconnection from both the past and the future and a hyper attachment to ‘the present moment’ is not a privilege of depressed people, though. In contemporary social practices, it is commonly disseminated - by the apparently optimistic discourse of ‘well-being specialists’, ‘life coaches’, ‘self-help books’ and also in ‘advertising messages’ - that ‘to live in the present’ is the most valuable formula for a good life. These discourses will sometimes refer to ‘bits and pieces’ of Eastern philosophy as an attempt to substantiate and disseminate a supposedly spiritualized view of the good life as one liberated from useless attachments with the past and pre-occupations with the future.

But bits and pieces of Eastern wisdom, carelessly transplanted without the needed sophistication of thinking to our secular, market-based and relatively desymbolized societies in the West, ends up reproducing, frequently, nothing more than an attachment with the empty, trivial instant.

The rising depression rates (and other mental pathologies) in children and young people - which would seem a scary and even unconceivable reality if it wasn’t already a disseminated fact – is one of the signals that something must be challenged about the way we have been relating with time and memories in contemporary conditions.

This later statement can only have sense if we concede that difficulties behind children’s depression belong not only – as the media so often portrays – to the realm of purely private traumas and abuse (as if the private could be dissected from the social). Neither should it be exclusively associated to the ‘devouring potentialities’ of our brains (as if there was a brain outside the ‘individual in the world’). There is, I think, much more to be said in regard to this disturbing phenomenon. For sure, this is a task that certainly demands a specific focus, which is not the one I have here.

I would like, though, to briefly consider the contemporary phenomenon of children / adolescent depression as an analytical device in order to examine the interplays between the contemporary experience of time, meaninglessness and depression.

The inconceivability of a depressed child lies in the fact that children are normally represented as the ultimate bearers of the thirst for life, of cheerfulness and hopes for the future: the very opposite, thereby, of the ‘being without a future’ of depression.

In addition to these common representations of childhood, we are living in a time when children have been commonly regarded as smarter than children of the past, somehow even wiser than adults<sup>26</sup>. This is, of course, a huge inversion of the way

<sup>26</sup> The new social representation of children gets expression in the social phenomenon of the so-called “indigo children”. The phenomenon is rooted in the publication of the book “The Indigo Children: The New Kids Have Arrived” (1999) by Lee Carroll and Jan Tober. According to a New York Times’ article with the suggestive title: *Are they here to*

children used to be seen: someone who was to be taught, raised and guided by adults (bearers and representatives of the forms, values and meanings of the world, and thus those who ought to legate the signification of things to children).

If we look closer, we detect that children appear in the social imaginary as smarter than adults chiefly because they are more conversant on the novelties of the present - just consider how many times we hear people saying, amazed, how their children can handle technological gadgets much better than them. Now, putting aside the fact that these gadgets didn't exist in the past, things have always been and will always be like that. The younger necessarily has more knowledge of and familiarity with what is specific to her generation. Parents (and adults in general) are by principle, representatives of the past, the ones who are expected to know what came before children appeared in the world and to guide "... the newcomers by birth through a pre-established world into which they are born as strangers" (Arendt 1956, p. 403).

Thus, the novelties of any new generation have always been something that belongs, mainly, to the 'newcomers'. What changed thereby, were not children themselves but mostly, the amount of novelties that we have to assimilate in today's accelerating societies and also, our relationship with the present and the past.

If it is the present, with its transitory and merely circumstantial, instrumental and always immediate pragmatic goals that mostly matters in the money culture of contemporary societies; if the past becomes virtually useless in an accelerating society when you always have to be ready for the new and the unforeseen (Rosa 2010a, p. 94); if experience, as Benjamin (1973) anticipated, tends to collapse, being reduced to a series of impressions we live behind in a succession of successive but ephemeral shocks that cannot become memories; and if we learn that even the memories that we may have formed have no value (for what matters for the ideal 'pure individual' of neo-liberalism is exactly what he does in the present despite the past, and also to 'enjoy in the present') we will increasingly tend to feel that we possess anything meaningful to pass on to children and youths. Rather, we will think that we must learn from them. We will sometimes try to imitate them and idealize them as examples to be sought. After all, they are prejudice free, spontaneous, flexible, creative, active, quick and 'liberated' from all the unwanted weight from past knowledge, social rules and conditionings, that is, they are more or less

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*save the world?* (Leland 2006), the book has sold 250,000 copies since 1999 and has spawned a cottage industry of books about indigo children. The 'indigos' are described as sharing traits like high I.Q., acute intuition, self-confidence, resistance to authority and disruptive tendencies. Still, these children are expected, according to a commentator and writer on the subject, to be "...the answers to the prayers we all have for peace".

what we learn – from the gospels of the neoliberal theology – that we should aim to become.

Thereby, living under the rules of the contemporary credo of ‘realism’ and hyper valorization of the present, adults can feel either impotent (because cultural referents seem lacking or obscure) or ambivalent about their task to bequeath cultural meanings and memories to the young. The dependence of the juveniles on parents - still acknowledged - is often conceived more on the level of ‘what to do not to disrupt the development of children’ than on the level of the transmission of memories and meanings.

This leads to a condition in which the adults’ role as “agents of socialization” is fundamentally challenged. The religious obedience to the new ‘credo of money’ is complete when parents, rather than operating as the mediators of meaning to their children, “...tend simply to supply whatever the media and advertising prescribe” (Dufour 2008, p 164).

What the horror of depression in children (and also anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, alcohol / drug abuse and other pathologies) seems to be silently saying is that children themselves are probably not gaining much from their high social status. Rather, they are in many ways suffering (perhaps even more than adults) from having to handle their natural aptitude to live life in its intensity and spontaneity without the protections coming from meaningful forms, values and sacred limits that are passed on to them by the community in which they live, in particular, by their parents and significant others, such as professors<sup>27</sup>.

Further, if the past has been losing worth, the contemporary experience of the future – which underlies our sense of direction - has also been changing.

Historically, as we’ve seen, direction and purpose were once perceived as a projection of obligatory, traditional conducts. Later, in modern fashion, people’s sense of purpose and direction was exactly to release oneself from traditional obligations aspiring rather towards autonomy, self-determination, progress, growth and promises of political transformations.

This makes the modern project, as Hartmut Rosa (2010a, 2010b) insightfully claims, dependent on and supported by social acceleration. Amongst the most ‘sacred

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<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting - as it is also the case with adults – that a significant number of ‘depression cases’ affecting children and adolescents may constitute, in fact, a medicalization of moral problems (see Brinkman 2013). This, however, does not contradict but reinforce my argument: it is exactly because we are lacking meaning - that is, because our values, memories and ideals are losing worth - that we are inclined to project ‘problems of living’ to the hands of specialists and experts.

principles' of the dominant cultural logic of Western modernity, he continues, the aim to overcome slowness and inertia stands out, incarnating into the speeding up of processes of transport, communication, and production. Indeed, Modernity is fundamentally defined as a time when dominant expectations are no longer rooted in the experiences of the past. For sure, the very notion of progress - upon which Modernity defines itself - involves the idea of the superiority of the present (and the future) in relation to the past. More generally, being modern refers, to a large extent, to the search for the means and strategies through which one can autonomously steer one's motion (Rosa 2010b): the very contrary of inertia.

Hartmut Rosa remarks that in late modern times, however, acceleration loses its attractive appeal as the force of liberation and autonomy. The "turning wheel" as the core symbol of modernity's love for speed and directed progress can no longer stand for the contemporary cadences of time. Nowadays, he argues, our relationship with speed finds a better metaphor in the image of the relentless motion of the treadmill (Rosa 2010b).

What Rosa seems to be implying - although he does not put it in this way - is that the dominant temporal regime in contemporary times is becoming desymbolized: it does not stand for progress, nor does it find solid legitimation within the symbolic order of society (as collectively established means for the good life). Even though contemporary acceleration is still inescapably rooted in the dominant cultural ideals of modernity, more recently - in the manners of the 'natural laws of economics' of the neoliberal political-economic theology - acceleration, in Rosa's terms, is becoming "... a self-propelling system". As such, acceleration does not depend on anything external to itself, being "... non-articulated and completely de-politized, such as they appear to be natural givens", something that 'just is', outside the borders of any moral or political debate (2010a, p. 42)

Rosa draws attention to 'symptoms' of desymbolization both in the public and in the subjective domain of life. In the public domain, he claims, the principles of speed are frequently put forward by economists and politicians. Nevertheless, they no longer appeal to the principles of the good life or social progress as the legitimating motives for acceleration, referring to the "...images of a bleak future and decay instead" (2010b). And if this kind of "frantic motion" appears in the collective cultural perception of time as "... the end of (directed) history", he argues, in the subjective plane, individuals tend to live life as series of changes and adaptations, but not as a process of development. In his words, "... in this perception, things change, but they do not develop, they do not 'go anywhere'" (2010a, p. 41) which might lead, in his interpretation, to various forms of alienation and depression.

Rosa also notes that in late modern societies, the old modern promise of shaping society beyond economic necessity is waning. As a result, individual and political energies are sacrificed “...to the acceleration machine symbolized in the hamster-wheel of socioeconomic competition” (2010a, p. 82).

The submission of time to economic competitiveness is emblematically symbolized by Benjamin Franklin’s famous equation of time and money. However, whereas Franklin’s statement “Remember, that time is money” (Franklin 1736, cited in Weber 2008, p. 12) is certainly accurate as an expression of the capitalist idea of saving time as a tool for gaining competitive advantage, the implicit consequences of this equalization must be analyzed and challenged. For the equation of time and money leads to the hollowing out of any worth of time beyond the indeterminate, merely calculative cash nexus. As Weber points out, the peculiar ethic underlying Franklin’s ideas is coloured with utilitarianism, that is, virtues are good because they are “... useful, because it assures credit” (2008, p. 17).

Indeed, when time is money, it is virtually disconnected from any specific ends beyond those of usefulness and credit. As such, it becomes a means to all circumstantial and utilitarian exchanges, without ethical worth and social significance towards the realization of a meaningful life.

However, there is no literal truth in Franklin’s statement beyond the strategic logic of capitalist accumulation. In the human universe, time is not (and cannot be) money. Rather, “... time is the fabric of our lives, it’s everything we have” (Kehl 2009b, *my transl.*).

The more this equation is artificially imposed and time follows the indeterminate paths of money, the more it lacks reference to the significance which can endow objective time with the fundamental sense of a meaningful connection between past, present and future. That is to say, if time is experienced as being as indeterminate and objective as money, it artificially and inhumanly becomes the time of the empty instant. A time that lacks social determination (coming from values and ends) has virtually no sense of duration and development, lacking meaningful connections between happenings and instants; a meaningless time which can only pass in a self-propelling way.

Thus, Rosa’s interpretation of depression as “... individual (deceleratory) reactions to overstretched pressures of acceleration” (2010a, p. 35) is certainly insightful. But how “dysfunctional deceleratory reactions” of some forms of pathological depression are to be understood? Rosa’s response is that the experience of inertia (that sometimes motivates the pathology of depression) originates when the dynamics of one’s individual



and collective history “... are no longer experienced as elements in a meaningful and directed chain of developments” (2010a, p. 40).

Building upon Rosa, we could summarize the issue by saying that when time runs in the rhythm of the speed and indeterminateness of money without any ‘hopeful representation’ of where ‘speed’ can lead us to; when time is consequently experienced as having insufficient connections with what came before and, also, seems rather directionless; or to put it differently, if the objective time of the clock cannot sufficiently ‘borrow’ the meaningfulness it lacks from memories of the past and from a ‘projected future’, one’s sense of purpose and direction is disrupted to a point in which actions might acquire the sentiment of randomness, and for some depressives, of hurtful meaninglessness.

In the next and final section of the thesis, I will analyze how issues of meaninglessness pervade not only depression as an experience, being also at the core of contemporary representations of depression as a concept.

### **9.1 - Some words on conceptualizing and coping with depression in the age of the money-God: the shadows of meaninglessness**

In a context wherein collective narratives of meaning lose generality, giving way to a cultural emphasis on the purported sovereignty of the individual, an increasing number of human experiences have tended to be interpreted by way of the pathologised language of ‘psychological problems’, in relative neglect of its social, moral, political and spiritual nexus.

More recently, another stage follows. The psychologization of the malaises of subjectivity and of the social is leaving way to (or being paralleled by) a propensity towards understanding virtually all experiences in terms of the brain. Analyzing this emergent tendency, Nikolas Rose coined the term “neurochemical selves” which stands for the inclination of contemporary Western people to contemplate “...our minds and selves in terms of our brains and bodies” (Rose 2003, p. 46). The author develops the idea: “... while discontents might previously have been mapped onto a psychological space - the space of neurosis, repression, and psychological trauma - they are now mapped upon the body itself or one particular organ of the body - the brain” (Rose 2003, p. 54).

The two ‘ideal types’ are not unrelated. If contemporary western societies are inclined to project all problems to the jurisdiction of individuals, both psychological and cerebral explanations tread different paths to accomplish the same thing: the projection of

human discontents to the interiority of our minds and later, bodies. In its political and social unspoken foundations, ‘brain-centrism’ and ‘psychologization’ converge. As Ehrenberg puts it, “... the brain is the materialist version of the personality’s totemization” (2009, p. 207).

However, the emergence of a “contemporary neuroculture” (Ortega 2009) has a genealogy of its own. As discussed in the first chapter, it is related to historical vicissitudes of the evolution of psychiatry in its quest to become a legitimized science within the medical field, being also a function of the recent unification between psychiatry and neurology (through which neurological and mental disturbances tend to be envisaged as a single type of problem). Finally, Rose (2012) notes, neurosciences gain intensified power by its convergence with the digital technologies and its dissemination to specialized and lay communities via the internet.

More broadly, ‘neuroculture’ is consistent with historical mutations in the contemporary understanding of individual and life and, I claim, it also reveals significant traits of the contemporary epoch in regard to issues of meaninglessness fostered by the money-God religion.

Concerning the earlier aspect, in societies wherein the individual is required to be a kind of entrepreneur of his own existence, achieving prominence in an increasingly competitive market, tools that hint at securing individuals’ selves through firmly supported ‘realities’ based on objective aspects of life, sounds like a blessing (Ortega 2009), an appealing alternative to a fairly large audience (Gardner 2003, p. 126).

But neurosciences’ increasing popularity can also be understood noting the fact that it comes up with a theory, a method and an underlying perspective of individual and of the world which, in significant ways, matches the principles of the contemporary religion of the money-God.

*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V) – the so-called ‘bible’ of the ‘neuroculture adepts’ – is exemplary of the latter argument. First, it depicts an ideal individual nearly extracted from the symbolic order: the manual presupposes that mental disorders are derived from a dysfunction in the individual and it is not an expectable response to any external stressor (Horwitz & Wakefield 2007, p. viii). Second, there is a clear prominence of the quantitative (number and duration of symptoms) over the qualitative aspects of discontents. For instance, the diagnostic criteria for major depression in the DSM-V require 5 out of 9 symptoms listed for the illness, lasting for at least two weeks.

It is therefore no longer the individual's singular, subjective experience which dominates the understanding (which in less reductionist psychological approaches could include the world in which this subjectivity is constituted). Rather, in line with the calculative logic of money rationality, pure objectivity is proclaimed as the very basis of reality. As Simmel once declared, referring to the money rationality, here, "...only the objective measurable achievement is of interest" (2000b, p. 176). Similarly, discontents are seen, ultimately, as real, calculable and purportedly manageable facts relatively disconnected from psychological or moral reasons.

The social popularity of the 'cerebral discourse' about our minds in general and depression in particular is therefore understandable in a world in which the calculative rationality of money prevails over the qualitative worth of things and experiences. In such a context, 'science' is one of the few societal domains wherein truth still holds some stability. Hence, individuals will tend to resort to the competent, specialized narrative of experts, the remaining authorities entitled to voice the truth about our lives in quantitative, technical terms.

As Dufour (2008) analyzes, if we want to secure reterritorialization in a world wherein the old collective enunciators go into decline, the 'mother nature' looks like an optimum solution. In his words: "This would mean that the myth would no longer be celebrating a cultural referent, it would be celebrating the real referent (...) it would be celebrating our origins: Nature. Now that the great totems of history have pretty well collapsed, geography [and biology<sup>28</sup>] is [are] making a comeback" (2008, p. 52).

Returning, very briefly, to the historical overview developed earlier, we find that melancholia has been represented in distinct ways according to specific features of the order of meaning of each particular era: a proof or onus of geniality; the *acedia* of those unwilling to dedicate to the needed moral sacrifices of religious life; sensitivity before the emptiness triggered by the collapse of previous forms of communitarian coexistence which modernity has destroyed; a dysfunction of rational thought; a result of psychological trauma.

Nowadays, the mainstream views on depression are being proposed as scientific and thus purportedly unrelated to any societal representations of existence. Ironically, for this very reason, these views completely match the state of affairs of contemporary societies. For if it is true that existence is being desymbolized by the force of the new theology of money, the fact that the dominant views about depression represent it as something basically extraneous to any horizon of signification beyond its reality as a 'neutral, objectively measurable phenomenon' is telling.

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<sup>28</sup> My observation.

Time-wise, depression simply *is*, something glued to the present reality of our bodies, with barely any past or any meaningful future, a real, asymbolic fact relatively alien from past memories and future prospects.

Clearly, the same paradigm is also at work in the striking growing of antidepressants consumption. When health practitioners, patients and society in general promote / accept antidepressants as the main (and certainly the more prestigious) form of treatment for depression, it means that the latter is being represented as a ‘mental state’ that does not refer, in the manners of money, to anyone in particular but to what is common among us (irrespective of any existential or cultural specificity), that is, the body.

Furthermore, the logic of the medical discourse is one in which individuals’ discontents are addressed by way of causes (mechanisms, either biological or, more rarely today, psychological, leading to effects - depression) whilst reasons (the existential and moral circumstances and issues underlying depressive experiences) are dismissed (Brinkmann 2004).

Indeed, if environmental causal factors can be overlooked, leading to the medicalization of problems stemming from social and existential grounds, concerns with values are even more distant from the neutral questions (and answers) of hegemonic medical / psychological theory and practice. This is so, Brinkmann (2004) argues, because both psychiatry and psychology are based on the historically rooted idea that their theories and practices should understand and treat “... how things *are* with the human being, not how they *ought* to be” (Brinkmann 2004, p. 60). As a result, critical matters of value are totally alien to both understanding and intervention; more specifically, the question of whether peoples’ discontents may stem from “... a lack of moral resources” (Brinkmann 2013, p. 113) are and *should be* out of discussion.

The immediate consequence of the dismissal of reasons and issues of meaning underpinning depression is also analyzed, in a distinct way, by Tort (2001 cited in Martins, 2008). The author claims that when signification demands are translated as mere technical demands, it may lead to a kind of “somatization of the symptom” wherein “... the access to the real of the body reduces what the symptom is ‘saying’ – the meaningfulness of the symptom – to what is merely empirically observable ... whereas the illness occupies the place of the patient’s identity (Tort 2001, cited in Martins 2008, p. 333, *my transl.*).

When the observable implodes language, a number of meaningful questions are muted: questions about our life in common, about what matters in the world in which we

live and about what should matter; questions about beauty, purpose, wisdom, in short, all those transcendental questions that concern ‘the meaning of life’ and cannot be addressed by the empirical aspect of life.

On the same theme, Andre Green’s critical accounts are somewhat prophetic. As early as in 1960, Green warned his professional colleagues that psychopathology should be aware of the risk that psychopharmacology may strip away the meaningfulness which is the human prerogative. Green highlighted that if psychiatry does not account for medication in a way that avoids the reduction of human to a simple projection of the nervous system, they would constitute a kind of “veterinary psychiatry” (Ehrenberg 2010b, p. 86).

Andre Green’s worries became, to a certain extent, realized in our ‘brave new brain’s’ era. Within today’s medical and general discourse about depression, issues related to our existence as “living creatures” (Rose 2012, p. 1) greatly surpasses concerns with issues of meaning underpinning suffering; more than this, the latter are not even part of the equation. As a result, the fundamental human need to find reasons to mental pain and meaning to life is left unattended.

In Brinkmann’s words:

... it is doubly tragic that moral and existential forms of suffering, stemming from a lack of meaning and value, are routinely pathologised, thus stripped of whatever meaning that was left. People who are looking for meaning meet a system of treatment that tells them that their suffering is meaningless and should be understood causally, thus possibly reinforcing the very ground of their suffering (2013, p. 114).

Indeed, if there is sense in thinking that today’s fragility of meaning fuelled by the money-God religion is one factor underlying the flourishing of depression rates, meaninglessness finds ratification in contemporary neuroculture.

If depression’s rampant rates can be seen as one of the signs of a broader meaninglessness crisis - wherein life is relatively desymbolized under the influence of the ‘money-God’ - the current ‘neuroculture’ reproduces and, at the same time, aggravates the crisis. This is done in the exact same manner of the money-God, that is, by addressing the factual, empirical aspects of life and dismissing the symbolic levels of existence of a social being, that is, a concrete person in search for meaning, living in an extremely complex world.

## Conclusion

The conclusion is structured in four parts. First, the main analytical findings of the thesis will be tied together, composing a unified and synthetic overview of the study. Second, I explore some ways by which the experience of meaningfulness can incarnate in the contemporary epoch. The issue gains concrete grounds through a brief analysis of Andrew Solomon's biographical trajectory - especially in the last stages of his experience with depression and after his recovery - which reveals his path out of depression and towards meaning. In the third step, the limitations of the study are identified, pointing towards some worthwhile aspects of the project to be investigated in the future. The section ends with some considerations on the thesis' contributions with respect to the research question, analyzing, in a succinct manner, how they contradict or amplify existing theories on the theme.

The present research intended to analyse how a context marked by contemporary 'crises of meaninglessness' generated and fostered by the political-economic theology of the money-God can have, as one of its effects, the dilatation of depression rates.

One of the thesis' significant findings is that the 'animal side' of human life has been gaining relevance in our epoch. This is true, as we have just seen, within dominating representations of depression in the medical field and general public discourse, which conceptualize and treat the problem as something pertaining more to our existence as animals, than to our existence as humans. It is also intrinsic to the paradigm of calculative thinking and pragmatism inherent to the rationality of money as a God - and the linked view of the individual as a maximizing animal with no reasons for action beyond his own interests - which, to a large extent, has been ruling over contemporary societies in the West.

The 'animality ideology' at the heart of ultraliberal societies reached the movies. In the 1987 Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street*, Bud, a young stockbroker desperate to succeed, becomes involved and seduced by a ruthless corporate raider who memorably declares: "Greed is all we have left, but greed is also what made America great. It's normal. It's healthy and it's what keeps the system going. Greed is good". But this is a story wherein the 'Law of the Father' still makes its mark and, eventually, prevails: bad conscience, guilt and existential emptiness disrupts the protagonist's millionaire lifestyle (un)ruled by the anti-ethics of money. The stockbroker finally chooses the moral, idealistic reasons of his father over the egoistic reasons of his mentor.

The 2013 film *The Wolf of Wall Street*, by Martin Scorsese, on the same theme, tells a very different story. Based on Jordan Belfort's memoirs, the film presents the life of the stockbroker in three hours of excess, perversion, limitlessness, corruption, sex, drugs and decadent hedonism, epitomizing the outright disregard for rules, values, limits and other people when everything and everyone are means for continuous money accumulation.

The role of the Law in the film is, at most, timid. Subjectively, no anguish, shame or remorse disturbs Belfort's humorously portrayed narcissism. Objectively, after serving a sentence of 22 months (in what is clearly a white collar prison where he is shown playing tennis), Belfort remains somewhat in control and literally, center stage.

The contrary is true for the FBI agent who built the case against Belfort. In one of the last scenes of the movie, Patrick Denham is shown riding the subway home after bringing Belfort down. His face shows no airs of victory, but a melancholic, uncertain expression (indicative, perhaps, of his own doubts about whether playing by the rules was really worth it). In any case, in Scorsese's film, the Law is doubtful, colorless, lacks glamour and prestige: things which, seemingly, only money can buy.

After all, wolves still run the show, in fiction *and* in real life. In the last shot of the film, 'the show' is commanded by the real Jordan Belfort (now a motivational speaker) and the fictional Jordan Belfort is the applauded guest speaker. He is the one expected to teach an audience about how to succeed in a world wherein 'everything is for sale'.

Indeed, 'wolves' are proliferating. Sometimes in the skin of money-mad psychopaths à la Jordan Belfort, subjugating all social values to the purposes of wealth accumulation and transgressing all limits. Other times, they incarnate in the skins of more ordinary people, including a number of egotists, of 'fun morality' adepts, and those whose life lack meaningful resources beyond the everyday quest for financial security, personal performance and consumption - forms of life which may, sometimes, coincide to either a cynical disparagement of values, or a blasé-like incapacity of value-discrimination (Simmel 2005).

Nevertheless, against totalizing views of contemporary society as a fully fragmented and meaningless epoch, the thesis concedes that most people are still engaged with the world and with others, having values, principles and behaving in ways that don't fit in the so-called 'me-ism' stereotype.

Those not at ease with the model of the Sadean, 'isolist ego' so frequently sold to us by the new economic-political theology of money as a God, are struggling - as our condition of 'animals of transcendence' has always impelled us to do - to find

completeness, and to address the questions of meaning: What is life about? What is the best way to live? How can I find purpose, meaning in life?

But in the culture of the money God, questions of meaning tend to be diluted either in the fluidity of inner validation (wherein, developing the modern perspective on morality, values are supposedly matters of individual choice and preference) or senselessness (since values are, according to the rationality of money, useless in any pragmatic sense).

Still, the worth of the impossible, of uselessness, of the intrinsic and non-pragmatic worth of things - the nourishment granted by ideals, social forms, historical and cultural heritage, in a word, by meaning – which money knows nothing about, is far from useless from the human point of view. Meaning is not only a basic human necessity, but it does not exist if not through the participation in something beyond our actions as isolated, calculative, maximizing animals.

One of the most compelling findings of this thesis is thus that after the social order of meaning in the West has seen its center of gravity to move from the cosmic immanence of reality, to the transcendence of God as a ‘governor’ of life and death, and finally, to the interior space of human reason or sensibility, a new kind of transcendence emerged in our epoch: the new theology of the money-God. Thus, behind the ‘liberation feast’, the profane has been sacralized and incarnates within the fundamental dogmas of societies ruled by the new political-economic theology of money: the purported power of individuals as sovereigns of their own self-crafted performance in life; the cult of pleasure, entertainment and self-image; the emphasis on instrumental and pragmatic rationality over the qualitative, idealistic worth of things; and the Supreme worth of things and experiences that Money can buy. These are kinds of guidance, for sure, but which can hardly help us to live and die meaningfully. Rather, it fuels a profound lack of wisdom on how to lead our private existences and our life in common. The result, with increasing frequency, is depression.

Thereby, despite the whole cultural climate of suspicion on everything which, from the exterior, would guide human life and the linked postmodern idea that morality should be a private matter not to slide into over-authority, the study suggested that ‘autonomy’ remains a still-to-be-seen Nietzschean aurora.

Presently, the purported ‘sovereignty’ of individuals has not been an undisturbed good dream. Rather, the feeling of ‘transcendental homelessness’ once detected by Lukács, still haunts today’s ‘liberated’ subjects. The ‘nostalgia for totality’ – embodied in a myriad of forms such as fundamentalist cults; addictions; co-dependency; the idealized



and utopian representations of the past in some strands of New Age movements (Kuhling 2004); the exodus to the Suburbia wherein many attempt to reawake the sense of “primordial perfection” (Eliade 1998, p. 186); and, more generally, in the widespread devotion to the dogmas of the political-economic theology of Money – suggests that the idea of a human being founded upon itself is an unstable condition upon which new gods (with its dogmas, symbols, altars and feasts) are thriving.

### **Outlets for a meaningful life**

However, and on a more positive note, if depression’s elevated rates is one of the contemporary social symptoms of the asymbolia and meaninglessness crisis fostered and reinforced by the theology of Money, there are still plenty of surviving, resisting sources of meaningfulness in life, potentially ‘healing forces’ against depression.

Contrarily to the ‘there’s no alternative’ spirit of the neoliberal political-economic credo, a whole spectrum of possibilities for a meaningful life beyond the rationality of the money-God can still be found in the contemporary era.

In other words, the reign of money and its dry realities of competitiveness, numeric formulas, pragmatic thinking, compulsive action, circumstantial and empty experience of time, and all forms of ‘ego-idolatry’ are myths, human constructions like any other. They are not the whole “Real” as the new theology wants us to believe.

Resisting spaces of culture and of life that can still breath outside the ‘fire’ of the money rationality are fertile soils upon which contemporary individuals in the West reinvent/redefine order and sacred spaces for life without the onus of repressive, exclusionary, monolithic, eschatological ideals.

Those who have crossed the dark psychic pit of depression – their memoirs often tell us – will re-encounter ‘light’ in the meaningfulness of non-quantifiable aspects of life: in beauty, in the bonds with others, in values, in love.

Among those, Andrew Solomon’s biographical trajectory - especially in the last stages of depression and after his recovery - reveals a graceful path out of depression and towards meaningfulness. In the very last pages of his *Noonday Demon: an Atlas of Depression* (2001), Solomon declares that even though he would certainly prefer not to have experienced depression “... there are values to be found in it” (2001, p. 439). In the last paragraph of the book, he completes: “I hate those feelings, but I know that they have driven me to look deeper at life, to find and cling to reasons for living. I cannot find it in me to regret entirely the course my life has taken. Every day, I choose, sometimes gamely

and sometimes against the moment's reason, to be alive. Is that not a rare joy?" (2001, p. 443).

Throughout the thesis I have elaborated on the problematic dilution of the critical spirit of contemporary individuals. Under the auspices of the 'ideal subject' of the money-God theology, individuals are being invited to incorporate forms of rationality marked by a lack of discrimination over the qualitative differences between things. This leads to a condition in which, as Dufour (2008) claims, individuals liberate themselves from all ties with values and critical stands (and often without realizing) become subjectively open to all fleeting impulses, a subjective state that has been systematically exploited by commodities.

What Solomon suggests in this passage, I think, is that the way out of depression involved, in his experience, exactly the opposite, critical work of 'finding and clinging' for reasons to live. Not the fluid, lawless, homogeneous and chaotic flow of life, but rather a life of continuous and conscious 'choices to be alive'.

His move makes a lot of sense. 'Death as the internal possibility of life' is, for people who experience depression, a close, intimate reality. And as we've seen earlier with Simmel, death is also the limit of life impelling it to transcend itself as a mere deregulated, chaotic flow in order to incarnate as engagement with the objective world, as meaning.

Solomon's auto-biographical details in his memoir on depression paint a picture of a reasonably happy, regular life, lacking psychological traumas and familial problems. This kind of narrative usually leads to a somewhat superficial but, still, common interpretation: this is a 'good life' wherein depression (purportedly, according with dominating views on the problem) could only be understood as an extraneous, biological phenomenon. However, Solomon is a proto-typical case of the contemporary subject – seemingly 'successful', well-off, professional, cosmopolitan, secular, liberal, living within 'liminal', 'limitless' conditions marked by the social forces of narcissism & 'isolism' and thereby vulnerable to depression associated with loss of meaningfulness. For instance, about life in his twenties, Solomon states:

I decided, almost on a whim, to become an adventurer and took to ignoring my anxiety even when it was connected to frightening situations. Eighteen months after I finished my graduate work, I started traveling back and forth to Soviet Moscow and lived part-time in an illegal squat with some artists I got to know there... I allowed myself to consider every kind of sexuality; I left most of my

repressions and erotic fears behind. I left my hair get long. I cut it short. I performed with a rock band a few times; I went to the opera. I had developed a lust for experience, and I had as many experiences as I could in as many places as I could afford to visit (Solomon 2001).

Of course, the very brief summary of Solomon's biography presented in *The Noonday Demon* (2001) does not allow any thorough interpretation of the social and subjective factors behind his depression, nor it provides sufficient information on the intricacies implied in the long process of his hardly won 'reasons for living'. But they are, in the least, suggestive of some of the ways through which he could transcend death towards the quest for a meaningful life.

Some years after his third depressive breakdown and the publishing of his book on depression, Solomon (who since 2003 was in a relationship with John Habich) decided to have a child together with his longtime friend Blaine Smith via in vitro fertilization. The child was finally born in 2007. She lives with her mom, now in a relationship with a male partner in Texas.

In the same year, Andrew Solomon celebrated a civil partnership with John Habich, followed by Christian *and* Jewish ceremonies.

In 2009, on the eighth anniversary of their meeting, the couple married again, so that their marriage would be legally recognized in the state of New York. Soon after, Solomon's second biological child, to be raised by him and John Habich, was born. George (the name was chosen after John's grandfather) was conceived with donor eggs via a surrogate mother, Laura, Habich's friend and one half of a lesbian couple whose own two-child family Habich enabled by donating sperm to them.

Solomon's trajectory is punctuated by bonds which are very much contemporary in its anti-traditional form (incarnated in a nearly difficult-to-conceive type of composite family involving a heterosexual couple, two lesbians, two gays and 4 children in three states). At the same time, forms - incarnated in social ties, the worth of memories and of values - are strongly, and intentionally, Solomon declares, part of this story.

A non-traditional, gay couple gets married in a traditional civil ceremony, providing them not only with civilian rights but with social roots. Christian *and* Jewish religious ceremonies of a gay marriage: again, traditional forms are fundamentally disrupted in its dogmas, all the while being acknowledged as a way to make them feel symbolically included into a collective space of memories, values and commitments beyond their private, self-choosing existences. In Solomon's words:

I was amazed at how emotional both weddings were - the first because it was a public declaration of our love in the company of everyone we cherished most in the world, and the second because *married*, which had applied to my parents and grandparents and back a hundred generations, was ours, too. The use of that expression drenched us in dignity. Since then, I've read stories to our children in which princes marry princesses, and though John and I are both men, I can say, "Just like when Daddy and Papa got married" (Solomon 2012).

By being married, Solomon and Habich have now their own, non-traditional particular narratives (Rev. Peter J. Gomes, a minister of the Memorial Church at Harvard who celebrated their marriage urged the couple to remain "outré" letting their "... imaginations run wild") contained within a greater, collective narrative which applies back 'to hundreds of generations'. They are thus, 'outré' inside society, not only in civil terms, but in the symbolic sense, by associating memories and substantive values to their own 'acts of imagination', endowing it with form, content and purpose.

He also seems to have bypassed the subjective desertification of an empty, transitory present moment – the 'pure present' was seemingly, in Solomon's experience with depression, a paralyzed time which left him 'split and racked' at the 'tightest corner of his bed' -. He did that by forging a continuity of subjective life from the past to the present and towards the future, combining, still, individual and collective time.

Finally, Solomon's 'choices to be alive' were possibly favored by the basic human gift of love and its associated gifts of long-term bonds, solidarity, care and gratitude. On the one hand, meaning here is rooted, as Durkheim would put it, in the fulfillment of his obligations as a father, husband and relative which are defined externally to himself 'in law and custom' (Durkheim 1982, cited in Hookway 2013). On the other, love is unconstrained, beyond or even opposed to duty. As the philosopher André Comte-Sponville beautifully puts it: "duty obliges you to do that we would do simply out of love, if in fact we loved" (2001, p. 224). Love is a gift that has thereby a dignity of its own, and although not 'sacred' in the Durkheimian sense of a social constraint imposed upon individuals from without, it is still, and fundamentally, something sacred in the sense that it grants meaning to life, something which money can never buy.

In this regard, in reference to Simmel's ideas, Keohane (2013) analyzes the ways through which, in the hyper-individualized contemporary condition, love relations constitute "more than life" experiences, forms of sociation which potentially generates

super-personal values which are sacred in themselves “... an end in an otherwise endless sequence of purposes” (2013, p. 70).

In 2012, Solomon wrote another book *Far from the tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity*. This book, a long work project of ten years, enabled Solomon to talk with more than three hundred families, collecting oral stories and memories of parents who have a child with conditions such as deafness, dwarfism, Down syndrome, autism, schizophrenia, multiple severe disability, early genius, conceived through rape, with criminal behavior, and transgender. Being for so long involved in narratives of love, care, sacrifice and responsibility – and deciding in the meantime to have his own child (in a clear suggestion of his developed awareness about the meaningfulness one can find through the beauty and the sacrifices of unconditional love) is perhaps another indication that the gift of love, but also of meaningful work (and a meaningful relation with knowledge) were significant means in Solomon’s trajectory towards the crafting of his own individual freedom as meaningful engagement with life.

Someone may counter this argument by saying that some people are married, have children, professional projects, and are still depressed. Indeed, this is not a formula, a definitive shield against depression, especially if we consider that these forms endure weakened social prestige as sources of meaning (endangered, as they are, by the commodification of all cultural forms). So, I am certainly not saying that marriage, parenthood, work, memories and other cultural forms such as art, religion, knowledge etc. are contemporary ‘safe paths’ to meaningfulness. Even though in their intrinsic worth they can represent significant resources where one *may* find meaning, they can also turn into meaningless, empty accomplishments, a collection of actions without purpose. Nowadays, these forms are sometimes founded upon egoistic or merely pragmatic reasons<sup>29</sup> in the valueless manners of the money rationality. In this case, ‘forms’ may be there, but they are not animated. They don’t impress a character to existence, don’t carry principles and reasons for action; by being, in Simmelian (2000b) terms, overly objectified, they don’t come back over its creators to enrich their lives, don’t enhance individual subjectivity; they mean nothing.

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<sup>29</sup> Keohane remarks, for instance, how home ownership (and familial life) can, ambiguously, be both a potential surplus of added value to life and a societal terrain for the flourishing of “...sedentary pleasure and the liberties of private life on the one hand, and, no less, with petty bourgeois conservatism, aggressive narcissistic defensiveness and a terrible entrapment in banal routine” (2013, p. 68).

## Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is the lack of empirical data associated to it. The possibility to investigate whether the issues of meaninglessness theoretically analyzed here are empirically confirmed in the experience of individuals suffering from depression would enrich and provide greater consistency to the argument.

In addition to this, the issue of how to cope with depression in a context of ‘crises of meaninglessness’ is another unexplored, but relevant, correlated aspect to be investigated in the future. As a psychotherapist writing about depression as a social pathology of meaninglessness, I should say that even though I fully agree that the psychologization of existence is a problematic element of the very meaninglessness crisis I depict here, the condemnation of psychotherapy *per se* is based on a mistaken opposition between individual and society, personal and social issues. With this in mind, the investigation of how clinical work with individuals experiencing depression could be re-interpreted and enriched by the understanding of this experience within a societal context of ‘meaninglessness crises’ is a relevant and timely issue.

## **How the research locates itself within the framework of sociological theories on the contemporary ‘depression epidemic’?**

First, I would like to stress that the present thesis – as noted at the very outset of the text – did not intend to explicate depression. Depression is, and perhaps will always remain, a mysterious, fugacious and multi-layered phenomenon just as anything human. Indeed, one of the challenging aspects of depression is that its causes will probably remain vaguely defined, especially if we want to artificially tease biology, psychology and culture apart in any definitive way.

Even within the sociological domain of analysis, the issue of meaninglessness in today’s culture of the money-God is one amongst others that can open up different, but often complementary modes of understanding the phenomenon of the rising rates of depression in contemporary times. That is, if the disarticulation of the symbolic order in a society wherein the rationality of money prevails can lead to the weakening of a meaningful relation to life and to oneself which may fuel depression, other conditions which are not directly related to the issue of meaning can also factor in.

This position may sound ‘scientifically’ inaccurate or vague, but this, again, is exactly the real, uncomfortable state that we find ourselves in when we try to inquire –

without unjustified intellectual pretention - on mental illnesses in general and depression in particular.

The theme of societal meaninglessness as an explanatory basis for the so-called depression epidemic is not new. Authors such as David Karp (1996) and Dan G. Blazer (2005) have, although from different perspectives, explored the links between depression's massive proliferation in our era and societal issues of the contemporary epoch that surrounds the theme of meaninglessness, such as the weakening of social ties (Karp) and the fragmentation of societies in the West leading to feelings of radical meaning loss (Blazer).

. The latter, in his book *The Age of Melancholy* (2005), claims that when the "sacred canopy" of modern progress has blown away, a gravest sort of anxiety emerges, connected to the very disturbing sense that "... we have lost our foundations and chaos reigns" (2005, p. 136). As a result, not only any fixed meaning stands, but even a minimum basis for the discourse about values is, according to his view, lacking. Depression, which he describes as a signal to withdraw, should be understood thus as a kind of adaptation to a grave anxiety emerging in a context wherein all authority is abolished, whereas all beliefs and explanations are brought into doubt, fracturing and fragmenting meaning.

The particular contribution of the present study to the theories exploring the interplaying between societal meaninglessness and depression lies in the distinct definition of meaninglessness advanced here.

Meaninglessness, in the context of this study, is neither a totalizing condition of fully fragmented societies (as we've claimed throughout the thesis, there are social reservoirs of meaning that offer resistance to de-symbolization), nor an intrinsic consequence of the collapse, *per se*, of master narratives of the past as implied in Blazer's interpretation. The weakening of our ties with values, principles, forms and ideals is not the passive result of a historical lack of the Other and of wider frameworks of meaning, but the active effect of a new kind of Law which weakens the strength of values and ideals by opposing all sources of signification (even if by incorporation, as it happens with the so-called 'authenticity ethics') beyond the fundamentals of money.

The argument can be further clarified through a critical dialogue with two existing sociological analyses on depression's expansion in contemporary times: Alain Ehrenberg's and Anders Petersen's accounts<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> As I did with Blazer's argument, my intention is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of the authors' accounts on the theme, but rather to delineate the basic lines of a critical dialogue between such theories and the present study.

Alain Ehrenberg examines the expansion of depression by way of an historical analysis of the processes by which psychic suffering and psychological problems become a significant issue in societies wherein autonomy becomes a norm (2010c).

He is thus especially interested in “... depression’s medical and social success” (2010b, p. xxix) which he envisages as being a function of the “... complex recomposition of relations between illness, health, and life and their relation to individual autonomy” (2010b, p. xxviii).

Thus, in a time when collective references for guiding human conduct are blurred and autonomy becomes the new social ideal, the ways by which people experience affect fundamentally changes (Ehrenberg 2010c). In this regard, Ehrenberg (2010b, pp. 8-9) claims that when western individuals move from a collective to an individual experience of themselves, guilty and conflict symptoms rooted into the dichotomy between the allowed and the forbidden (at the core of neurosis) tend to be supplanted by feelings of inadequacy and symptoms of action inhibition, fueled by questions about the possible and the impossible (the basis of depression).

To be very brief, here lies the fundamental explanation for the expansion of the diagnosis of depression given by Ehrenberg: through inversion /opposition, depression reveals the mutations of individuality when, as of the second half of the twentieth century, values associated with autonomy, action and initiative have been generalized.

The present study certainly concurs with these arguments. In a society wherein religious and secular authorities subside, whereas the individual is enjoined to be his own sovereign, discontent will tend to be experienced as failure, something fundamentally referred to individuality, not to the Law. In relation to this, Ehrenberg will rightfully argue, the modes of thinking about depression will tend to focus on the individuals’ ‘functioning defects’ (etiology being more akin to the Janetian model of mental illness as exhaustion, than to the Freudian model of mental suffering motivated by unconscious reasons; hence, diagnosis becomes, fundamentally, a function of signs such as passivity, lack of motivation, inability to function and fatigue). In parallel, the prevailing modes of treating depression will center not on reasons or memories, but on the recovery of individual action, ultimately, through antidepressants (Ehrenberg 2010b).

What shortens the breadth of his analysis on depression as ‘the fatigue of having to become oneself’ is, I think (as I mentioned in chapter 7) that the capitalist economic context underlying the process by which values associated with autonomy are imposed, is left relatively unexplored. To be very brief, depression is understood primarily as mental rigidity, fatigue and action deficiency *within* a neo-liberal context wherein the very



opposite of these traits are required for constant economic progress. The gap in Ehrenberg's analysis is thus, in my opinion, the fact that he is not sufficiently precise about how the contemporary modes of experiencing affect, and of reasoning about affect under the rule of action emerge via the spreading neoliberal idea of self-realization underpinned by market principles of meritocracy, self-sufficiency, efficiency and productivity.

Anders Petersen fills this theoretical gap. Building upon Ehrenberg, he maintains that depression's increasing rates in contemporary society should be socially understood as the dark side of today's social demands for authentic self-realization associated with the emergence of the new spirit of capitalism (Petersen 2009, 2011). That is, the continuing struggle of the individual to live up to norms - to be active, to explore one's potentials, to be innovative, creative, always 'on the move', motivated, a sovereign of his own life (which Petersen recognizes as decisive virtues of the productive, efficient and profitable ideal individual of neo-liberalism) - may exhaust individuals to depression.

The argument sounds true and certainly consistent with the thesis' views about the contemporary epoch. And I do think that the flourishing of depression can, to a certain extent, be seen exactly in this light: the lasting and continuous pressure to realize oneself as an authentic, flexible, creative, social, innovative, in a word, a powerful individual, constitutes an extreme social pressure over the individual psyche; a "... chronic stress factor which risks rebounding in the form of depression" (Petersen 2011, p. 7). Still, being the sole agent responsible by his achievements and failures, when the individual cannot live up to demands of "lasting and authentic self-realization" (Petersen 2011, p.7), personal discontent can only reflect back on him. Alone in its "... inner normative tribunal" (Petersen & Willig 2004, p. 348) the self may become exhausted; sentiments of worthlessness may follow, preparing grounds for depression.

The present study draws upon, but complements this perspective by changing the analytical focus from the stress-inducing effects of the imperatives of action over the self to the deficiency of meaningful reasons underpinning the norms governing individual action in conditions of the political-economic theology of neo-liberalism.

Inasmuch as 'authenticity' becomes a tool of the capitalist system, it lacks worth as a moral ideal and becomes, rather, a part of capitalist ideology. As earlier analyzed, when 'authentic self-realization' becomes an ideological means of the system's legitimation, and a practical tool for its reproduction, individual action is emptied of values unless those instrumental in order to keep oneself employable, honoring normative expectations of being competitive and profitable. Authenticity here, rather than an ideal in

which one may find meaning, can only incarnate on the individual's constant endeavor to "... marketing her/his virility in order not to seem passive, unmotivated, indolent or incompetent" (Dejours 1998, cited in Petersen & Willig 2004, p. 344). More broadly, 'authenticity' also incarnates on the purported actualization of choice and uniqueness through consumption and identification with artificial personal-styles disseminated by the media.

In sum, if authenticity is to be analyzed as a contemporary 'social ideal' it has, so far, been so enmeshed with capitalism that, often, all it can get is a very precarious expression wherein things like choice, autonomy, self-realization etc. are not even at stake. Rather, the very opposite of these ideals stands out: behind the cloak of self-fulfillment and freedom, action embodies extremely gregarious behaviors of blind obedience to the imperatives of the economic system.

Meaninglessness becomes therefore part of the equation of 'authentic self-realization demands'. The actualization of one's inner potentials, the continuous devotion to action is, in this format, basically valueless. Necessity and compulsion underpin action, not meaningful values originated in sacred ideals; it's also a kind of action alien to the Nietzschean affirmation of the *overman* able to forge life as a creative venture. If Nietzsche would probably deem this form of life as a new kind of servitude, Durkheim would perhaps claim that this is "an ideal without grandeur" (Durkheim 1973, p. 44) merely utilitarian in character "... so that consequences result mechanically from the act of violation" (1974, p. 43). Finally, borrowing from Simmel's ideas, we may think that whereas the enhancement of personal subjectivity and the achievement of individual goals of performance (as promoted by contemporary 'authentic self-realization' demands) may bring the "... satisfaction of having fulfilled a demand..." (Simmel 2000, p. 60), the devaluation of the objective world – the disconnection from and devaluation of all things outside the 'pure individual' - may in the end drag "... one's own personality down into a feeling of the same worthlessness" (Simmel 2000b, p.179).

In the individuals' concrete lives, actions may be experienced as meaningless (and compulsive) when its motor is "an overbooked project calendar" (Petersen 2011, p. 17) performed repetitively and persistently as in 'the relentless motion of the treadmill' (Rosa 2010b) while being unable to provide a deeper sense of reward and purpose. As Petersen himself states, referring to the unclear character of both the content and criteria behind self-realization norms: "They possess no finality, and are surrounded by an air of boundlessness" (2011, p. 11).

Referring again to Brinkmann's rationale, we might argue that while the normative imperatives of self-realization associated with the spirit of capitalism may address the existence of causal links for behavior, it does not provide reasons for action (intentions expressing meaning, rooted in horizons of signification beyond the delusive neo-liberal ideology of an omnipotent 'pure individual'). In other words, to the extent in which money has bought its way into and over the ideal of authenticity (transmuting ends of authentic self-realization into means of further money expansion) authenticity can be a 'cause' or a fuel, but not a meaningful reason for action.

### **Concluding remarks**

To acknowledge the worth of meaningfulness in human life and to bring into question the purported freedom that the new 'theology of the money-God' disseminates, does not necessarily mean to advocate either a return of transcendence, the resumption of society as we once knew it, or the reinvention of 'new totalities' and absolute meanings.

In this study, in particular, it does not imply a call to new idols or hopes for the renaissance of old authorities, but the acknowledgement that limits, social forms, principles, values, heritages from the past are part of life, and that the latter cannot subsist in any meaningful way without the earlier.

Dufour's analysis on the issue goes directly to the point that we want to argue here. He remarks that, on the one hand, an emphasis on the ontological dependence on social structures which plays down issues of socio-political domination that these structures may sometimes entail is partial, and dangerously conservative. On the other, to concentrate solely upon socio-political dominations (in defense of liberty) while being oblivious to the specific role of culture to the very realization of individual freedom, is equally mistaken (Dufour 2008, p. 156).

In other words, if we neither need, nor desire the imposition of a single, totalizing, rigid, universalizing 'sacred pole' from wherein all meaning originates - embodied in institutions which mutilate individual freedom - we still need the sentiment of sacredness emerging from cultural forms, values and ideals which can weight against the 'infinite expanse' of negative freedom, homogeneity (the leveling of all values) and calculability, all of which are greatly intensified in a world wherein money is a God. Without social forms, no meaningful point of reference (even as something for the individual to contest and strive against) or reasons for action can take root and hence, no orientation is possible.

Thereby, even conceding the possible moral potential of individual freedom and authenticity as meaning-giving ideals, the pervasive contemporary view of individuals as grandiose beings in no need of guidance, independent of the world and its objects, cultural heritages, sacred principles and ideals is found wanting. First, it is oblivious of the fact that there is no 'individual' outside society and no meaningful life uncontained by the mediation of cultural forms. Additionally, it risks being naively unmindful of the new forms of domination (often disguised as the very incarnation of freedom) which continue to guide and indoctrinate us while lacking the wisdom of sacred principles outside the nexus of cash value.

Tying together the thesis' specific understanding of what constitutes a meaningful life with its analysis of the current societal conditions, we can conclude with the following words.

Inasmuch as, unlike animals, human beings do not simply persist through time; since they are not complete and self-sufficient, which means that their specific human task to *lead* life is not resolved upon nature, humans have to transcend the 'pure flow of life' through cultural forms.

For this reason, the new transcendence of the money-God – by opposing all culturally established values, ideals, institutions and principles that may block the dissemination of commodities - has been challenging the task of signifying life, leaving individuals emptied in forms of pseudo-autonomy disguised in the cloaks of delusive 'authentic self-realization', hedonism, purported freedom and enjoyment.

Thus, a world that cripples meaningfulness – by disseminating realist, pragmatic, egoistic, self-centered, nihilistic dogmas that subjugate the intrinsic human need of cultural forms - is one in which individuals risk not being able to find what matters, which is not only an ontological need of human beings but, also, a constitutive aspect of each one's identity. As a result, sentiments of personal worthlessness and meaninglessness will tend to flourish, fueling the diffusion of depression.

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